

Stranger Unscenes by LyricalRiot

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Summary: Beginning after Eleven closes the gate, this will be a little exploration of scenes we won't get to see between Seasons 2 and 3, including Eleven's budding friendship with Max, exploring her relationship with Mike, Hopper's with Joyce, and the onset of growing up. Mild language warning (the kind they have in the show.) Mileven and Jopper content heavy.

1. Closing the Gate: Aftermath

Stranger Unscenes

CHAPTER ONE

Eleven barely remembered getting from the lab back to the cabin. She slipped in and out of consciousness as they drove, her body weaker than ever before. No, was that right? She'd been weaker, once. Mike, Lucas, and Dustin had desperately called her name from somewhere far away, but she had been unable to surface - only to be finally brought back by Papa cradling her.

She twitched in agony.

"It's okay, it's okay." Hopper's husky voice came to her from somewhere above her head, soothing away the fraught memory. She couldn't muster the energy even to open her eyes, so she sank back down into semi-consciousness.

When the truck stopped and the rumble of its engine beneath her fell silent, Hopper scooped her up and carried her inside. Like a baby. Like Papa had done. Except this was different. Instead of sad and scared, she felt relieved and safe. Instead of craving love, she felt deeply loved. When the door closed behind them, she heard other voices. Others in the cabin? She struggled to remember why they were there.

"Hop, is she alright?" The voice of the mother, Will's mother.

"She's okay, just weak. Help me get her in bed."

"Is it this one? Where are the sheets? I'll change them."

"Actually this one's mine. Hers is in the other room."

The voice of Nancy next perturbed Eleven's bleary consciousness as Hopper and Joyce moved with her across the cabin. "Mike will want to know she's okay. Can I go get him?"

Eleven twitched at the name. She wanted to see him. He needed to know she kept her promise. She opened her eyes and tried to look around. Everything moved too fast. It exhausted her just trying to track anyone's movements.

"I want her to rest," said Hopper.

"Mike," Eleven managed to whimper.

"Okay, okay. Don't worry." Hopper hurried to reassure her. "Fine, Nancy, go get him. But just him, okay? The others can wait."

"I'll come with you." A male voice. Will's brother. "They should still be at the house."

"Mom, is that her?" Someone else asked. Someone with a voice as weak as Eleven felt. It was soft, too, and almost feminine. But then, maybe it was rather more adolescent. A little higher than Mike's, but similar. "Eleven?"

"Yes, that's her." A flurry of movement, and then Eleven felt herself sink into the soft old mattress of her bed. It smelled clean and familiar. The cabin was far too warm, the heat making her skin feel as if it were glowing, but somehow that heightened her sense of safety and comfort.

Except when she closed her eyes, and a yawning red gash flashed before the blackness of her lids. She shuddered and opened them again.

Will's mother sat down next to her, gently cleaning her face with a warm, wet cloth. "You brave girl," she crooned. "You brave, remarkable girl. Well done. We're so proud of you. So grateful. You sweet, beautiful, brave girl."

Eleven felt the affection as if from far away, but she did feel it. Relaxed, she slipped into unconsciousness again.

The next time she became aware of anything, she saw Mike sitting beside her. It felt like it had been a long time, judging by the heaviness of her eyes. She blinked at him, trying to decide if he were real or a vision in the Void.

"Mike," she whispered, reaching out to touch. If this were all in her head, he'd vanish into smoke.

Instead, he took her hand. Real flesh and bone pressed against hers. "I'm here."

She sighed a breath of relief. "You're real."

He grinned. "Yeah I am. Elle, you did it! Do you understand? You saved us."

A brief flash of memory took her to Kali again, standing before her sister and echoing the same words back to her. *I can save them.*

She trembled as she turned her hand in his, gripping it. "You did something. To the distract the...the dogs?"

He smiled and tugged on the bandana wrapped around her arm. "This is way different from wearing my sister's old dress. You look pretty cool."

"Mike."

He grew serious again. "Um, yeah, we did. We distracted them. We couldn't let you walk into that death trap."

"Thank you."

"Even though Hopper won't tell us what happened in there, I know that it must have been incredible. You must have been incredible. We couldn't have done it without you, Elle. We'd all be dead for sure."

Not if she hadn't opened the gate in the first place, she thought.

"Sorry it took so long for me to get here," Mike said after a minute. "We didn't have enough gas to get back to Will's house. We used it all up in the tunnels. So we drove as far as we could and then we were walking back when Nance found us. They'd been driving around forever looking."

She didn't have any concept of how long it had been, or the confusion of them trying to meet back up again, so she didn't muster up the

energy for a reply. Weariness nearly swamped her back into blackness again. She couldn't go to sleep yet though. Mike was here, and she had missed him too much to sleep now. There was something still left unfinished about all this — wasn't there?

It came back to her on the splintered memories of last year. She gripped his hand a little tighter. "Mike. The Snow Ball?"

A little puff of air escaped him - the only sound of his surprise.

Hopper, somewhere near the doorway, stirred. "Snow Ball? What's she talking about?"

"The school dance," Mike mumbled, watching Eleven with too many emotions battling across his face. "You remembered?"

A weary but genuine smile shyly crept across her face. "Yes."

He laughed a little, and it sounded sort of choked. "Yeah, of course we'll go."

"Hang on, kid, we haven't talked about this. Don't be making promises," Hopper said quickly.

Mike slid him an irritated glance. "I already made this one a year ago, and she and I don't break promises."

Eleven felt tears sliding down her cheeks. Exhaustion had brought her feelings too close to the surface. She looked at Hopper, leaning against the doorway with his arms over his chest and dark circles growing under his eyes. He was tired too, and she'd learned that he wasn't the most amenable to her requests when he was worn out. But this was important.

"Please?"

Hopper sighed, passing a hand over his eyes. "Okay, okay. Don't worry about it right now. We can talk when you're strong. You need sleep. Do you even remember what you did tonight? The Snow Ball can wait. It's not for at least a month. Just rest."

She saw others now, beyond Hopper in the other room. Saw Mike's

sister hovering by the door with Will, his mother and brother. They looked like they were waiting for something. For Mike? She shivered, and his grip on her tightened.

"Mike, don't go."

Hopper intervened before Mike could say anything this time. "Hey, don't be selfish, kid. Poor Mike here hasn't slept in his own bed for a couple nights. Tomorrow's a school day."

Mike looked at him as if Hopper had grown a second head. "School? You think I can go to school after this?"

Hopper frowned. "Look, whether you try to fool your mom into giving you a sick day or not is your business. You're going home tonight. Besides, these guys are your ride home and we all need rest. Will especially. He needs it just as much as Elle does."

Eleven felt herself spiraling back into sleep again, as if the mere suggestion had convinced her body it was a good idea. She fought a little harder. "Mike."

He returned his attention to her, expression softening. "I'll stay if you want me too."

"You won't," Hopper insisted.

"Go," she managed to breathe. "But come back."

"I promise," he said fervently.

She didn't remember what happened after that, allowing herself to relax back down into sweet oblivion.

Author's Note:

Welcome to my random lil Stranger Things story, a collection of scenes between scenes, and some fluffy nonsense after. I have some ideas for a plot for this thing, but mostly it'll just be exploring the bits we wouldn't get to see on the show because they don't drive the

story. This may or may not include some messy hallmark's of El's adolescence, and some Jopper & Mileven fun.

Some of you have been following this story for a while, and have noticed my very long hiatus. I took a break to write some SW stuff, and then my life went full crazy and I had to step away from FF for a time. But I'm back, and I read the SUSPICIOUS MINDS Stranger Things novel, and I'm writing some new updates for this story, so you'll see me cleaning up these early chapters from time to time as I get back into this. Thanks for being totally tubular! Let's get to it!

2. Recovery

CHAPTER TWO

Eleven awoke two full days later. She didn't know how long it had been at first — only that she felt much, much better. Hopper was pleased to see her, and even more pleased when she wolfed down more food than he'd ever seen her eat.

"You had me worried for a minute, you know that? I thought maybe you'd never wake up."

She licked the last drop of yogurt off her spoon and sat back in her chair, regarding him silently.

He grinned. "Yep, there she is. There's that look. Missed you, kiddo. So what's going on in that head of yours?"

She glanced around their little cabin. "Now what?"

"What do you mean?"

"Everyone is safe. Now can I go?"

"Go out? 'Fraid not. Not yet. I know — I know," he said hastily as her mouth tugged into an annoyed frown. "But you don't have to be in isolation. I'm not sure I could keep him away if I wanted to. He's been bugging me for the last two days while you've been out of it. Think you're up for some visitors?"

She illuminated, the unexpected thrill of anticipation instantly casting a golden glow on her entire outlook for the day. She was about to argue that she'd handled herself quite well in Chicago and throughout that journey, that she didn't need to be sheltered in this shack any longer, but her belligerence fell away at the cheerful prospect of seeing her friends.

Hopper chuckled. "Okay, okay. Go take a shower and change your clothes. I'll let them know you're up."

Mike, Dustin, and Lucas all arrived a few hours later. Max was with them. Eleven found that irksome. Didn't they go anywhere without her now? The boys remarked on her hair, which had resumed its bouncy, curly shape after she washed all the grease out of it. They decided that they liked this style, and it made her look a lot more normal, but that the punk look was "definitely awesome too."

"You look more like you without the makeup," Dustin decided. "More like Elle from the basement, and less like Elle the Vanquisher."

"She still vanquished monsters when she was Elle from the basement," Mike pointed out. "It doesn't really matter how she looks, she's always Elle the Vanquisher."

Max rolled her eyes. "Man you guys are *such* losers. Elle, are you okay, now? Do you feel...recovered?"

Her voice carried a note of genuine interest. Like when she tried to introduce herself, she was clearly trying to convey niceness and friendship. Eleven was pretty sure she didn't need this girl's concern or friendship.

Before she decided whether or not to answer, the boys immediately jumped on this question and began to ask it themselves, in their own versions. After they made certain she truly *was* well recovered, they began to clamor all over one another to tell her about their version of that eventful night. They talked about the demodogs in the tunnels, and Dart the the Tree Musketeers, and Steve fighting Max's brother as well as saving all their hides. She enjoyed their enthusiasm as they all gushed about it, even if it did make her heart squeeze with fear a little knowing the peril they'd put themselves in.

But there was no doubt about it, their actions had saved her and Hopper. They'd helped her close the gate. She loved them for that.

"How is Will?" She asked when they finally paused for breath.

"Oh, he's fine," Lucas assured her. "It's just that his Mom is keeping him at home pretty much for the whole week just to make sure."

"Yeah, we just saw him before we came here and he's basically back

to normal," Dustin agreed. "No Mind Flayer virus left."

Mike frowned. "Well, not fully normal. He's sad about Bob."

Eleven said nothing. She'd not known the man, but she'd more or less seen what had become of him. She knew that his death was a blow to the Byers family. Joyce had mentioned it that night in her house. And Eleven had sensed in that moment the sadness and trauma in Mike when Bob was brought up, so on some level she understood the tragedy of it. But in the end, for her, he was just another mark on the list of people who had died because she accidentally opened the gate.

"So, um, Elle," Max said tentatively, trying again. "What about you?"

"Yeah," Lucas leapt on her question. "What happened when you closed the Gate?"

"Did you see the Mind Flayer?" Dustin cut in.

Eleven remembered the enormous moving shadow behind the red divide. The tendril of darkness reaching to her. Goosebumps scattered across her skin, and she opened her mouth to reply, but Hopper beat her to it.

"That's enough of that," he snapped from the kitchen. "It's over and done with. Let's just try to move on, okay?"

"Was it that bad?" Dustin asked, eyes widening. He looked at Eleven for confirmation.

Hopper snarled. "I said that's *enough*. She doesn't need to relive that experience for your entertainment. Find something else to talk about, or this visit is over."

They all exchanged side glances and awkwardly searched for another subject to talk about. It wasn't easy. Their year had been filled with experiences she couldn't relate to, and didn't understand. Hers had been endless, tedious, and then a burst of interesting activity she didn't want to tell them about yet. When the world wasn't ending, what did they have to say?

Eventually they settled on recounting the plot of Ghostbusters to her,

and telling her about Halloween.

She watched Mike as he attempted to describe their costumes, smiling at the description. She did not tell him that she'd seen it herself.

"What did you do for Halloween?" he asked her when he had finished.

Eleven glanced up at Hopper, whose gaze flicked up to meet hers. He had taken his lunch over to the table and ate silently. She looked back down at her hands again. "Watched TV."

"What? That's boring. You didn't even bring her any candy?" Dustin said accusingly over the back of the couch.

Hopper ignored him.

Eleven shrugged. "Next time."

Mike grinned. "Yeah, next time we can all go together. All of us."

"You mean Elle and I will actually be able to be part of your group costume?" Max asked, incredulous.

Dustin frowned. "Don't act like we excluded you. We didn't know you when we planned our costumes this year. And you didn't like us until that night anyway. It's not our fault you got left out this year."

"Chill. I'm only teasing."

Lucas looked at Mike. "That's a good question, though. How do we adjust our party to include two girls now?"

Mike looked from Eleven to Max, and back to Eleven. "What are you talking about? No adjustment needed, it's done already. Besides, there are lots of costume ideas out there that include girls. We could always do something like Star Wars." His words spilled out faster and faster, the way they did when he was excited. "Yeah, it'd be easy. Will could be Luke, Elle could be Leia, Dustin could be Obi-Won, I could be Han Solo, you could be Lando, and Max could be Mon Mothma, or that rebel pilot girl from Hoth."

Lucas's eyes narrowed. "Mike, why am I Lando?"

Mike backpedaled quickly. "Or you could be Obi-Won and Dustin could be Chewy."

"He has the hair for it," Max laughed.

Dustin produced this strangled moaning noise from somewhere in his throat. The others laughed, but Eleven startled.

"It's just a Wookiee sound," Mike assured her. "He does it all the time."

Eleven gave Dustin an uncertain look. "What's a Wookiee?"

"Wait, you haven't seen Star Wars?" Max asked in amazement.

Mike and Dustin frowned at her, but Lucas came to her rescue. "Um, see, the Bad Men didn't really bother to show Elle movies between evil experiments."

Max cringed. "Right, sorry. For a minute I forgot. She just seemed kind of normal."

"Give it time," Dustin said, laughing. "She's actually a huge weirdo."

Eleven grinned at the old, familiar title. She had been called many things, but Lucas and Dustin alone had given her that distinction. It had angered Mike in the beginning, but she didn't mind. Right now, it carried all the affection of two of her favorite people.

The rest of the afternoon passed in a similar fashion, the conversation flowing from one random thing to the other without further hiccup. Finally, Hopper kicked them out. Or rather, he took them home at great insistence. When the others had slipped out the door, Mike turned around and embraced her tightly one last time.

"I'm glad you're alright, Elle. And I'm happy you're back."

She clung to his hug with an almost desperate feeling. "Me too."

He didn't want to go, and she didn't want him to either. Being apart

meant there was a risk they might vanish from each other's lives again.

But they did let go and he heeled after the others, Hopper yelling at him to hurry it up. Eleven watched them go and wished for their return.

Author's Note:

Thank you, thank you for your lovely reviews! Snow Ball stuff coming up!

3. Getting Ready

CHAPTER THREE

The next few weeks crawled at an agonizing pace. Hopper kept everyone away — reminding her that bad people might still be searching for her. He allowed her to communicate with Mike on the radio a few times, but otherwise her solitude settled firmly back in place. Still, she had the Snow Ball to look forward to. Surprisingly, it didn't take any effort at all to get Hopper to agree. She mentioned it once, he didn't immediately say yes but he also didn't say no, and so she knew the battle was won. She tried her best to humor him and keep him in a good mood, despite her frustration at being cut off from the world again.

Sometimes she used the Void to visit her mother. It made her sad every time, so she didn't do it often, but once in a while she knelt before her muttering, chair-bound mother and told her all was well. She was safe and taken care of. Every time, she left with a dull throbbing need for maternal love.

Once in a while she thought about using the Void to see Kali, but that web was tangled with too much emotion and she wasn't sure she wanted to pluck at it again. One day, perhaps.

She still hadn't told Hopper about that experience. Maybe she never would. Right now it she held it close, kept it hidden and private. It was both for the sake of Kali, who she did not want hunted, but also for the wounds that particular experience had reopened. They were deep, but they were her own, and had nothing to do with her life in Hawkins. Hopper didn't need to know. Mike didn't need to know. That memory was for her alone.

And thus she found ways to occupy her time while Hopper worked and she waited for the anticipated Snow Ball to arrive. She tried to find information about school dances, but her dictionary and thesaurus didn't yield any helpful results, and the TV shows she flicked through didn't depict it either. She didn't know what to expect. Her only experience with dancing was that awkward little jig

Hopper always did when he put on music he liked.

The day before the big day, Hopper came home early. His signal caught her off guard, deep in her dictionary. When he came in, she gave him a curious look and said, "Four fifteen today?"

In reply, he placed an envelope on the table and motioned to it. When she stood to come over, he withdrew a piece of paper, showing it to her. "I cut out early so I could show this to you. You're almost free," he explained. "The Bad Men are letting you go."

She looked at the paper. Birth certificate, it said. Jane, it said.

Jane Hopper.

She looked up at him, not quite understanding.

Clearing his throat he rubbed his beard and motioned awkwardly. "So, that piece of paper says we're family. It says I'm your dad — that you're my kid. Officially. Is that okay?"

Her eyes widened as she looked from certificate to him again. At first she didn't know how to react, but her body responded anyway and a moment later her eyes swam with tears and her hands started to tremble.

"Hey," he said in a gruff voice. "Don't get all emotional on me."

She cast the paper on the table and rushed in to hug him, pressing her face into his strong, broad chest. He wrapped his arms around her in a fully encompassing bear hug.

"Is this a yes, then? You're okay if you and I stick together for a long time?"

"Yes," she breathed, peace sweeping through her like a soothing balm. She had an identity now. She belonged to someone. No longer a number from a lab, an experiment gone awry.

Introducing herself as Jane to her aunt Becky and to Kali had been a surreal experience - one that felt like putting on clothes a few sizes too large for her. Not quite right. Returning home to Mike, Dustin

and Lucas, and to Hopper — hearing the word *Eleven* on their tongues had brought back feelings of home. But now Jane belonged to her too. Maybe, in time, she would grow into it.

"So, kiddo, we need to talk about this dance tomorrow." She stiffened. Surely he wasn't going to tell her she couldn't go *now*? He laughed and continued. "I got you something."

She reluctantly pulled away from him. Odd that she hadn't noticed it before, but now she saw on the table a bag with an unfamiliar name printed on the side.

"Hopefully you like it. You needed something nice to wear."

He handed her the bag, and she looked in. A swath of blue-gray winked beneath tissue paper wrapping. She withdrew a bundle of slate colored cloth. Pink polka dots scattered across it, and accented its edges. She let it unfurl. It was a beautiful dress — the prettiest she'd ever seen.

"This is mine?" She asked, breathless, scarcely believing.

Hopper tried to disguise his smile. "All yours. Did I do okay?"

"Yes." She hugged it to her and lithely scampered to the couch where she laid it out to admire all its finery, running her fingers over the rose-colored belt at the waist.

"Listen, I don't know much about hair and makeup and all that stuff girls like to do before something like this. Is it okay that I asked for some help?"

She looked up at him curiously. "Asked who?"

"Someone who knows a lot more about it than I do."

Hopper didn't elaborate, but launched into his ideas for the evening's celebration of their official little family. Eleven would have to wait until the evening of the next day to learn who would be coming to transform her looks. She didn't mind. Tonight she was Jane. Tonight, she was happy.

Day of the Dance

"Hi Elle," Nancy greeted as Eleven emerged from the bedroom.

Eleven wasn't quite sure what to say. She didn't know Mike's sister well - not as well as she wanted to, anyway. Nancy had been there that night when everything went wrong and through it all she'd been exceptionally kind. But Eleven still felt guilty that she had played a role in the death of Nancy's best friend. The image of the dead girl still haunted her sometimes. She had longed for Nancy's friendship, as Mike had that same night described — like a sister. She still wanted that. Since that night, she had technically found a sister. But while Kali filled a void in Eleven's aching heart, and taught her much about her powers, she didn't provide that model of femininity that Eleven seemed to crave.

Nancy was exactly that. From the moment she saw the older girls pictures in Mike's house, and explored her room, Eleven had felt keenly all the girly things she'd been denied at the lab. There she wasn't female, she was a weapon. She wanted to be pretty like Nancy. Mike's efforts had helped satisfy that for a brief time, but it was only a disguise. The way he looked at her made her feel pretty even when she knew she wasn't, but she still wanted everything Nancy had been allowed to be.

Now she was here. With the express purpose of making her look girly.

Eleven blushed. "Hi."

Nancy sat down at the table and began withdrawing items from her bag. "Will this be the first time you've had makeup on? Well, except that charcoal you showed up in at the Byers'."

"No." Eleven didn't add that the makeup she'd worn before had also been Nancy's.

The older girl nodded. "Good, that's good. So you know not to rub your eyes and all that stuff. Well, we're pulling all the stops today, okay? Gotta make you gorgeous for your first dance."

Eleven smiled. This sounded promising.

Nancy turned out to be all warmth and friendliness as she worked on Eleven's face. She talked a lot about her experiences at the Snow Ball when she was in middle school. She talked about her friends and their makeup successes, and failures. Some of the stories made Eleven grin.

"And this, this makes the boys crazy," Nancy explained as she applied gloss to her lips. "They like this."

Eleven glanced at her to see if there were any hidden messages in Nancy's face. If there were, she couldn't read them. People were hard to understand sometimes. "Why do they like it?"

"Makes us look more..." A sly smile snuck across her face. "Kissable, maybe? Who knows."

Eleven remembered wearing it before. She liked the look, but not the feel. Nancy's theory gave her pause, because it did not match her limited experience.

Nancy continued. "Now I don't know if you'll get your first kiss tonight or not, but a bit of advice from one girl to another? Boys are trouble, trust me. Fun, yeah, but trouble.

"Why?"

Nancy glanced around conspiratorially. Hopper was outside, smoking, so Eleven wasn't sure who she was looking for. She leaned in close. "I'll let you in on a little secret. They're all basically stupid."

Eleven blinked. "They are?"

"Most of them. They think they have us all figured out, but they don't."

"Is Jonathan stupid?"

Now it was Nancy's turn to blush. She ran a hand over the back of her neck and laughed. "I'm not sure. I don't think so, but I'm still trying to figure that out. Now, take this."

Eleven looked at the tube of lip gloss in her hand. She took it gingerly.

"I got that one especially for you. Put some on before you go in, so it looks fresh. Let's work on your hair. It's so pretty - your curls are just perfect. It won't take much. A little water, a bit of spray, a cute clip — we got this, don't worry."

A whirlwind of activity descended on Eleven's head. Nancy spritzed and brushed, blasted hairspray and fussing about, placing her floppy curls exactly where she wanted them. Along one side, she applied a blue clip. Twisting a final curl onto her forehead, Nancy finished her work. She took Eleven to the bathroom mirror.

"So, what do you think?"

Eleven stared at her reflection. It didn't look like the blond girl she saw in Mike's mirror. It didn't look like the warrior girl in Kali's mirror. The reflection looked like *her*. Though her edges had been softened and made sweet, she still saw her own self behind the styling. Eleven, or Jane. She smiled. It suited her.

"Pretty..." she said, approvingly. "Pretty good."

"I think so too." Nancy turned her around and gave her a hug. "I've got to go, but I will see you there, okay? Jonathan and I are chaperones. And don't tell Mike I was here. It's more fun if he doesn't know."

Eleven nodded. "Thank you."

"My pleasure. See you there."

She gathered her things and swept out of the house in a hurry. Hopper came in after her.

He stopped dead in his tracks at the sight of her. "Whoa."

Eleven grinned. "Pretty?"

"Way too pretty," he decided. "Maybe I shouldn't let you go tonight."

Dismay and confusion swept through her, furrowing her brow and escaping through her breath in a puff of air. Before she could find words of rebuttal to say, he lifted his hands and laughed.

"I'm kidding! Only kidding. You just look far too grown up, that's all. It's making me nervous."

She relaxed — sort of. Not understanding the joke made her uneasy. Why did it make him nervous to see her like this?

He went to the kitchen. "You hungry? You should really eat before you go."

She didn't feel hungry at all. Anticipation made her stomach feel fluttery and sick-ish. "No."

"Well, we're eating anyway. Flo sent some leftovers this afternoon. I'll heat it up."

Dinner was agonizingly slow. Hopper seemed to be in no hurry. Eleven ate a little, barely tasting anything. Flo's leftovers were often very good — much better than the TV dinners they usually had. But tonight, she had no appetite for it. She chewed mechanically and pushed the peas around her plate.

"So will everyone be at the dance?" Hopper asked between bites. "The boys. Max. All them?"

She nodded.

"Do you know what happens at dances?"

"No."

"That's okay. You'll see when you get there. Everyone's awkward at your age, so it won't really matter. I bet your little friends don't know what the hell they're doing either."

"I know that you don't go with your sister," she supplied, pulling what little information she knew. "Or a friend."

Hopper glanced at her out of the corner of his eye. "Okay," he said.

"Who do you go with, then?"

She shrugged, suddenly self-conscious.

He sighed. "Alright, you haven't touched your food in a couple minutes. Go get dressed."

Elated, she leapt to her feet and dashed off to her bedroom to retrieve her newest treasure. It only took a few minutes to slip into the dress, soft against her body, flowing against her legs. She felt light as air in it.

Drifting over to the mirror, she smoothed her skirt and checked that Nancy's hard work was still in place.

When she emerged again, Hopper smiled. "Ah kid, you'll kill him tonight."

That alarmed her, but he didn't notice. Instead, he came forward with a little package. "Here. Something else for your big night."

She withdrew from the paper a delicate gold bracelet. Her heart thrilled at the sight of it. It was so sparkly and pretty. She'd never worn anything with that much shine.

"Here, I'll help you put it on." He took it gingerly from her, and opened it. He snapped it around her wrist, but didn't withdraw his hands. Instead, she felt him slide something else over her knuckled and onto her wrist. When his hands finally did come away, she saw the blue braided bracelet he had always worn for as long as she'd known him.

She looked up.

He swallowed hard and met her gaze for a second before he had to look away again, eyes misty. "Have a wonderful night, okay, kid?"

She rushed in to give him the tightest hug she knew how to give. Her heart felt huge and full. However difficult this last year had been, however much she'd resented him for keeping her from Mike for so long, it all vanished in this moment of softly glowing love.

4. The Snow Ball

CHAPTER FOUR

She'd never been around so many people her own age. The assembly they snuck her into didn't count; she had been in disguise and had gotten out of there as quickly as possible. Now though she went as herself. As Eleven. Or maybe as Jane. She paused outside the doors, watching others rush in. Blue light filtered through the windows up top, and muffled music blasted into full sound whenever someone opened the doors. She shivered. The circumstances had been so different the last time she entered this gym.

Rallying her courage, she entered the building. The friendly man who took the modest fee Hopper had supplied her gave her no suspicious looks, though she recognized him as the only adult at this school who had ever spoken to her. He didn't seem to remember her at all. Just as well, she decided, and walked through the second set of doors.

She felt immediately intimidated by the swarm of people - mostly clustered together in the middle of a blue-white sparkling sea. She scanned them, a tight knot in her stomach.

But then she saw him.

In flesh and blood, whole and safe and real. Not a figment in the Void. Not teetering on the brink of deadly disaster. Real and waiting. For her.

She didn't remember moving towards him, but suddenly they were together. Shy and eager all at once.

He thought she looked beautiful. Warmth bloomed in her chest and on her cheeks. That sounded so much better than 'pretty.' He asked her to dance and she hesitated, seeing how the others moved. It looked very specific, like they all knew what to do. But his eyes on her drew her attention back to him, and no one else seemed to matter anymore. Even when he took her hand and led her into the midst of them, she forgot their existence. Only he mattered. Mike, and his

dark eyes and his soft smile. He guided her hands to his shoulders and wrapped his around to the small of her back. He gently tugged them into a sway, like everyone else.

This...this was more touch than she was used to. Especially with him. He'd held her hand, and twice hugged her, but this felt like something else entirely. She decided she liked where his hands were. She liked being this close to him.

Mike. Her first friend. She had missed him more than she knew was possible. She had learned that you could miss someone you didn't know, as had happened with Mama and Kali, but it was a different thing altogether to have someone in your life, to love them, and then to lose them. Mike had been that person. He had been kind to her from the beginning, championed her when his own friends doubted him, kept her safe from the Bad Men and believed in her ability to use her powers for good. He had taught her about friends, about trust, about the feeling of home. His absence in her life had left a rift as wide and gaping as the Gate she just closed. But now he was here, and she never wanted to be without him again.

She could feel happiness radiating from him as well. Peaceful happiness. And there was a look in his eye that made her heart trip. She'd seen it once before, only back then she didn't know what it meant. This time she did, and met him when he moved in.

His lips found hers again in a sweet, brief kiss.

A kiss that, though anticipated, still surprised her with the feeling of it. Her body stiffened and didn't know if it wanted to lean into it, or lean away from it. However brief, it was like electricity sparking through her. She let out a shaky breath and smiled when he pulled back to see that she was alright. He rested his head against hers, grinning in the glow of their togetherness.

For the rest of the dance, they were never far from one another. Even when the slow song ended, the couples around them broke, they themselves finally parted, and the group gathered again as if pulled by Mike's leadership and gravity, they remained side by side, never more than inches away.

"Elle!" Dustin exclaimed at the sight of her, weaving through the crowds. "You came!"

She looked at his hair and smiled. It wasn't him, but it also wasn't the wildest thing she'd seen. It made him seem older.

He saw her gaze and his hands strayed to the nest of curls self-consciously. "Do you like the new do?"

"Yes," she decided.

He illuminated. "Really?" Turning to Mike and Lucas he puffed out his chest. "See? The ladies love it."

Mike smacked Dustin's arm and gave him a pointed look, inclining his head towards Eleven.

"Oh, right, how rude of me. Elle, you look very pretty." He laughed. "It's still so weird to see you with hair, though."

"Good weird," Lucas amended.

She glanced at Mike who still watched her with that warm, adoring expression. She blushed again.

A fast song started up again and Dustin broke into confident dancing. The others teased him for his moves, but his energy was infectious and soon they joined him. Mike's hand found hers, and Dustin's found her other. Together they moved her about to show her how to give in to the feelings of joy radiating through her. It was fun and wild and so refreshingly carefree.

She laughed. The sensation of it bubbled up through her body and escaped in breathless peals. It was the first time she'd ever laughed like that, and it felt so good she thought she might burst. At the sound of her laughter, Mike grinned his biggest grin yet and pulled her to him, briefly placing his head against hers as he did during the slow dance, and then took her hand to spin her into a twirling circle.

She laughed more, and it was glorious.

The lights through the Snow Ball flickered and glowed noticeably

brighter. The air seemed to crackle with energy.

"Uh, Mike," Dustin observed, motioning to the lights.

"Is she doing that?" Max asked, glancing from Elle to Lucas.

Mike and Eleven looked around. She winced. The lights cooled back to their normal shade. "Oops."

He grinned. "It's okay."

"You weren't doing that on purpose?" Will asked, in obvious awe.

Eleven shook her head.

"She's just happy," said Mike, unable to disguise his delight. "Really happy."

"Elle, we love you and we're happy you're happy," Dustin said, laughing, "Just don't explode the lights."

She bit her lip. "Sorry."

Mike tugged on her hand. "Come on, maybe we should take a break."

The group moved off together to the drink table where Nancy had resumed her chaperone duties after the slow dance. She grinned when she saw them.

"Elle, you're beautiful," she said with unveiled affection.

Eleven met her gaze and saw a conspiratorial look there. She grinned and looked away again quickly,

Mike grabbed a cup from his sister and handed it to her. "Here," he said. "You'll like this."

She sipped the sweet liquid curiously. Was it juice? Was it soda?

"The lights are sure acting up. That's not usually a good sign for us," said Jonathan, sauntering over to them. He tousled Will's hair. "Saw you dancing with a cute girl, big man. Way to go."

Will grinned sheepishly. "The lights are Eleven's doing, don't worry."

"Surge of power?" Jonathan asked, glancing at her.

Eleven shrugged. She was aware of Nancy watching them, a funny kind of smile on her face. At one point, she threw her brother a wink. Eleven wasn't sure why or what it meant, but Mike either didn't notice or pretended not to, so she didn't ask.

They took their drinks over to a table where they all sat together. While she said little, she basked in the euphoric flow of conversation around them. A fever seemed to burn through the group — the fever of youth, of relief to be alive and of being together in such oddly normal circumstances after such dire ones. The joy of feelings expressed and unspoken fanned the flames of their excitement. It felt so good to be with them.

Eleven's hostility towards Max even eased a little, though she couldn't quite understand why. Mike paid her no more attention than was strictly polite, which helped. Lucas and Dustin seemed as normal as ever. She loved them for it. Will acted a little shy towards her, and she wasn't quite sure how to behave towards him either. Their two fates had been so long intertwined, but they had never intersected like this - both on the same plane of consciousness at the same time.

It didn't seem to matter much, though, for most of her attention kept gravitating towards Mike. Their gazes would frequently catch, eliciting an abashed smile from him and a leap of her own heart within her. Her mind returned each time to that thing he did with his lips and hers, that kiss. She liked it, even though both times the strangeness of the act had startled her. She found herself wishing he'd do it again.

At the end of the night, she didn't want to go.

Outside, in the cold, Mike hugged her goodbye. The feeling of *home* swept around her in his embrace. She had longed for his company for so long, longed for this promised night and all its magic. It did not disappoint. She nestled into the comfort of this closeness and felt that nothing bad would ever happen to her again if only she could stay right here forever.

Their friends encircled them and bid her goodbye too. She felt another surge of love for them. Except that fire-haired girl. Although this evening had diminished some of the bad feelings, she still saw Max as an unwelcome interloper. Still, she was in too good a mood to be belligerent. Her friends were all safe - she had cut off the monster's access to them and protected them once more, just as they had shielded and protected her in the beginning.

She thought about Kali and the painful decision to leave her sister, to put herself between the monsters and her friends. She would make that decision over and over again, if she had to. She would do anything for them.

"Goodbye, Elle," Mike murmured as Hopper's truck pulled up behind her.

"Bye, Mike," she gave him a shy smile.

He rushed forward and gave her one last hug. "I'm really happy you came. I couldn't even go last year. I couldn't face it without you. And I really wish you could sleep in my fort in the basement again," he confessed.

"Me too."

"Hey, hey, break it up," Hopper said from the rolled-down window. "Get in, kid. It's freezing."

They parted reluctantly, and she climbed in the truck. She watched Mike and the others receding from view as they drove away.

"So," Hopper asked. "How was it? Your first dance."

Her mind supplied a word which she had first heard from the mouth of Lucas after flipping that van. She grinned. "Awesome."

When she went to bed that night, she closed her eyes and let thoughts of the evening fill her mind. It was getting much easier now. With almost no effort at all, she slipped into the Void.

Mike sat on the edge of his bed, staring at his hands. He looked

happy. His smile was that kind of lopsided grin she recognized as the one he reserved for her. She wanted to touch him, but knew that if she did, he'd vanish into smoke. Instead, she sat next to him on the bed, savoring the one-sided togetherness, until he eventually kicked off his shoes, crawled up to his pillow, and fell asleep.

Surfacing from the Void and rolling over, she too fell into a peaceful sleep, happier than she could ever remember.

Author's Note

There's something so pure and fun about writing tweens. I loved writing this chapter. We never get to see them be really happy on the show (of course, given all the crap they go through) so it's refreshing to explore some un-worried moments.

5. The Day After

CHAPTER FIVE

"So has the Chief showed you board games, Elle?" Mike asked, plunking down a stack of boxes on the tiny table she shared with Hopper.

Eleven ran her fingers over them, reading their strange titles. She shook her head.

The others gathered around and began to deconstruct the pile.

"They're called board games because you only play them when you're bored," Max joked.

Mike rolled his eyes. "They're called board games because usually they are played on some kind of board."

Lucas glanced at her. "You didn't play games in California?"

"Not really. Bored games were a last resort kind of thing. We did a lot of other things to pass the time."

"Well our options are limited here," Dustin cut in. "We want to be with Eleven, but she can't go anywhere. Not much to do in this place."

Mike shushed them. "Let's just pick one. Elle, do you want to pick?"

She returned her attention to the games. They all looked alien to her, and she wasn't exactly sure what to expect from those brightly colored boxes. She reached out and plucked the safest-looking box: a small rectangle about the size of her hand.

"Ah, the classic of all classic game staples," Dustin said approvingly. "The deck of cards."

"Spoons," Will chimed in, grinning. "We should teach her to play Spoons."

"What is *Spoons*?" Max asked.

Mike turned to Eleven. "Do you guys have any spoons here? Like silverware."

He followed her to the kitchen where she opened a drawer to reveal the utensils. He grabbed a handful.

"It's a pretty fun game. It can get kind of crazy, but it's not too hard to understand."

Nostalgia made Eleven remember the days spent in Mike's basement. The energy was similar, though less urgent as the boys clamored over one another to explain the play of the game. She listened and, one way or another, understood the basic rules. Max did as well, so they embarked on their first round. They all sat on the floor, Eleven with Mike and Dustin flanking her, Will beside Mike, Lucas beside Dustin, and Max between them. They passed cards rhythmically around the circle, a pinwheel of spoons — one fewer than each had — on the floor in the middle of them.

Dustin got all the required cards first, and reached for a spoon. Immediately, the others threw down their cards and snatched to grab a spoon of their own. Though she understood this component of the game, it startled Eleven the first time it happened and she didn't grab one.

Still, being 'out' did not feel like a disadvantage. She watched as the others played and how quickly everyone reacted when the first spoon was drawn.

The second round went much better. This time she paid attention to that extra bit of understanding always running in the back of her mind. She knew which cards the others were collecting, and when someone was about to complete their hand. She didn't miss grabbing a spoon this time.

The third round, they decided to put the spoons in the other room, requiring them to make a mad dash to stay in the game.

This time, Eleven couldn't help herself.

She saw the final ace coming before it arrived in her hand, and she was ready. She got to her knees and the moment it touched her hand, she threw down her cards and sprang to her feet, sprinting the length of the cabin while the others shouted and thundered behind her, pulling at each other, tripping one another, wild laughter filling the space. As she approached her room, she extended her hand and a spoon zipped from the pile, through the air, and into her grasp. She stopped abruptly as the others crashed into her and clamored around her to get to the pile.

"Ohhh that's cheating!" Max said from the bottom of the human heap fighting for spoons.

The others came away triumphant.

"Is it?" Will wondered, glancing at Eleven. "I mean, if one of us could run way faster than the others, would it be cheating? She's just using a talent we don't have."

Mike grinned. "Yeah, that's all."

"Mike, come on, it is an unfair advantage," Lucas contested, but amiably.

Eleven glanced between them, the bubbly, laughing sensation in her chest dulled with self-consciousness now.

"She probably didn't even realize she did it," said Mike. "Did you, Elle? She's just used to it, like we are to reaching with our hands to something we want."

Eleven looked at her spoon. "I won't do it again."

"Hey, it's okay," Dustin quickly came to her side. "No one's mad. We're just having fun."

"Fun." She looked up at him, half-smiling.

It wasn't difficult to relax after that. Max, although out, seemed fine to watch from the sidelines as they all scrambled over one another to get to the spoons again and again. Although she didn't use her powers to pull a spoon to her hand again, she couldn't help knowing what

was happening in the game outside her physical sight. It still helped her stay in until the very end.

After Spoons, they taught her how to play Operation. Eleven liked that game. It startled her every time and made them all laugh. She couldn't get the tweezers to do their work without setting off the buzzer and light, but no one else seemed very good at it either. Mike had surprisingly steady hands, but he struggled with the wishbone.

"Hey Elle," Will said when it was Eleven's turn again. "Can you do it with your powers?"

Eleven gave him concerned look. "Not cheating?"

"Nah, we won't count it," said Lucas.

"Yeah, we just want to see you do it," said Max.

Mike frowned. "You're not their trained monkey. You don't have to do it if you don't want to."

She ignored his well-intentioned defense and directed her mental energies towards the board. The rest of the pieces floated effortlessly out of their nooks. They hovered a few inches above the board.

The others looked on in awe. She casually wiped at her nose out of habit, although this time there was no need. Minor things like this didn't take the same kind of effort it used to.

"That is definitely cheating," Hopper insisted.

They all startled and whipped around at the sound of his voice, not having realized he'd come in. Eleven lost focus, and the pieces clattered back to the board.

"Welcome," he told them dryly. "So we're all just hanging out, now?"

"Well, if Elle's not free to come to us, why can't we come to her?" Dustin explained.

"I see." He nodded. "Did it occur to you that you might be followed by people who are still looking for her?"

"No...?" Dustin said slowly.

Lucas shrugged. "Hawkins Lab is closed, isn't it? Who is still looking for her?"

"Who knows. I was told to keep her in hiding for another year," Hopper said a little testily.

Mike immediately got to his feet. "You can't keep her from us for another whole *year*."

Hopper was obviously not in the mood to deal with a bunch of contrary teenagers. He sighed. "Clearly not. Who brought you?"

"Jonathan," Will said.

"And how are you getting home?"

"My mom," he continued. "She should be here in half an hour."

"Good."

Eleven saw that Hopper wasn't pleased at the situation, but wasn't sure why. She glanced at Mike, who met her gaze and shrugged.

"So when are you guys going to show us how to play D&D?" Max asked after a moment of awkward silence. They were grateful for the distraction.

"It's kind of complicated," Lucas said slowly.

"Yeah, Elle should at least get used to regular board games before we spring that on her," Dustin agreed. "It's next level."

"Do girls even play D&D?" Will wondered.

Dustin smacked his arm. "Hasn't hanging around these two taught you that girls can do way more cool shit than we can? Sure it's complicated, but also super fun. They'd love it."

Mike turned to Eleven. "Would you want to learn?"

She met his dark eyes with that familiar feeling of bewilderment. She

understood that they were discussing a game — a difficult game. But if it were anything like what they'd done this afternoon, it sounded nice. "I think so."

He grinned. "It'll be kind of weird for you, I think, since you're a mage in real life. Actually, for all of us because we've all fought real monsters. But it's still fun. I'll come over and help you make a character. Then I can write a cool campaign for us to play."

"You write it?" Max laughed. "Man, you guys ARE nerds. How do you even play?"

"Well, I'm Dungeon Master, so you all kind of play against me."

Eleven frowned. "Us against you?"

"I mean, not really against me. More like, against the story. You know? But I'm guiding the story."

The boys then launched into a convoluted, interrupted explanation of ability scores and checks, of character races and classes, of all manner of bewildering components until both Eleven and Max were thoroughly lost, but nonetheless entertained. They they kept talking over one another and seizing control of the explanation, rendering the conversation impossible to follow. By the time they heard Joyce knock on the door, they had all utterly lost track of time.

"Thank God," Hopper groaned, going to the door. "None too soon, Joyce. I don't know how much more of that wizard chatter I could take."

She smiled and shrugged. "That's your fault, Hop. If you let her out once in a while, that kind of talk could happen at my house where you don't have to hear it. I'd be happy for them to be at home more often."

He shook his head. "Not yet. I'm not taking chances. It's not you, I just don't trust that no one's still looking for her, y'know?"

She nodded. "I get it. I still have nightmares that this isn't all over."

Hopper and Joyce stared at one another in worried silence for a

moment. The teens watched them, exchanging glances with one another.

Finally, Joyce sighed. "Will, guys, come on. Time to go."

The group packed up their games. Eleven missed them already. They all stood up.

"Not you, Mike," Hopper said suddenly. "I'll drive you home later."

Mike froze.

Dustin and Lucas exchanged grins and elbow nudges. Turning to Mike, they gave mocking salutes. "Bye, Mike. Nice knowing you."

Eleven and Mike shared a confused glance, and together they looked to Hopper for explanation. But he said nothing to them, just chatted idly with Joyce until the kids all filed out and she said goodbye. Unceremoniously, he shut the door behind them.

Eleven smiled a little. Whatever the reason, she was pleased to have Mike remain behind.

"Wipe that look off your face, kid, this isn't going to be a treat," he said quickly, seeing her expression.

Her smile vanished. Beside her, Mike tensed.

"Sit down, both of you."

They sank down on the sofa cushion.

"Look, it's still not safe for Elle to be out in the world. Last night was a one-time treat. Special circumstances," Hopper began.

"I get that. But you're not keeping her locked away for another year. She needs friends," Mike interrupted, insistent.

Hopper frowned. "I'm boss around here, kid, not you."

"I'm still going to visit her."

"I can see that, which is why you're here right now. If this is

happening though, we need to set some ground rules."

"Rules," Eleven sighed.

He nodded. "That's right. Number one, Mike doesn't come over without asking me first."

Mike's brow furrowed in confusion. "Why? Who has that rule? I don't ask Dustin or Lucas' parents before I go over. We just show up."

"Two reasons. One, because Lucas and Dustin aren't in danger from secret government programs."

"Which have been shut down."

"But which might still be out there," Hopper said with visible annoyance. "Reason number two, is that you aren't the same kind of friends with *her* as you are with the others."

"What are you talking about? We are all best friends."

Hopper rolled his eyes. "Yeah right, kid, you think I'm blind? You think I don't know how things work between boys and girls? You think I didn't get it when all she talked about all goddamn year was visiting you, and only you?"

To this, Mike said nothing. Eleven bristled, her chin dipping down to cast Hopper a dark look. He would not keep Mike away again, like before. She couldn't stand another year of solitude — not after last night, and definitely not after today.

Hopper ignored her. "Which brings me to rule number two: You can't be alone with her. I don't care if that's here at the cabin, or when the day comes that she can go elsewhere. You're never to be by yourselves, just the two of you."

"Why?" Mike cried, jumping to his feet in indignation. "I would never hurt her!"

"I'm not worried about you hurting her."

"I've been alone with her before - she lived at my house where

nobody knew about it but me."

"Mike kept me safe," Eleven insisted, bewildered and upset by these new and unfair laws being handed down.

Hopper held up his hands against their protests. "I'm aware of this but —"

"I took care of her before you even knew she existed!" Mike burst with unveiled anger. "And now you don't *trust* me?"

"Like it or not, she's *my* responsibility now," Hopper bellowed suddenly. "Not yours! So sit down and chill out. You're both way too young for all this."

"Too young for what?" Mike demanded.

"All of *this*," Hopper gestured between them. "This thing between you. This little relationship and what comes after, the dating and kissing and all of it. You're too damn young!"

The lights flickered violently around them. Mike and Hopper both glanced around, their blood chilling at the sight of every book, utensil, pen, and paper and small object hovering in the air.

Eleven glared at them, but held her temper.

"You're upsetting her," Mike muttered, but retreated from the battleground anyway.

"Look, Elle," Hopper said, immediately calming down. "I know you care for him a lot. Okay? I just want you to be a kid for as long as you can. You didn't get to have much of a childhood before, so I'm trying to give you one now. You guys are getting older now, and that means stuff that your little brains didn't even think about a year ago. All this boy-girl stuff is heavy, and it's not for you. Not yet. I just don't want you to grow up too fast."

"I want Mike here," she said darkly. It seemed ridiculous of him to say he didn't want her to grow up when he had, once, bellowed the exact opposite at her in his anger.

"I know, and he can still come see you. It won't be like it was before. But he can only come when I'm here, or if he brings others with him. It has to be that way. I'm sorry."

"For how long?" Mike asked.

Hopper pinched the bridge of his nose in exasperation. "What do you mean?"

"How long until I prove to you that I'm not a threat?"

"Kid, as long as she has feelings for you, you'll always be a threat."

Mike glanced at her then, and she at him. Quickly she looked away again. Hopper's logic bewildered her, but she saw that this was a point of non-negotiation. It didn't make sense that because she preferred Mike above any of the others, she should see him in a more restricted fashion than any of the others. What was Hopper worried about?

Mike looked discouraged. She wanted to comfort him, but she didn't know how.

Eventually, he gave up the fight. "Fine. You're the chief of police."

"I'm her father." Hopper passed a hand over his face and headed to the kitchen. "I'll give you a few more minutes, and then I'll take you home."

Mike nodded.

"Oh, last rule," Hopper added. "When the day comes that she can go out into the world again, her name has to be Jane, okay? I know it'll be tough. She's Elle to me too, but legally she's Jane. If she starts high school with you guys, she'll be Jane to everyone at school. That's what you'll have to call her in public. It'll deflect suspicion if anyone out there is still keeping an ear to the ground for Eleven. Got it?"

Mike frowned. "Jane?"

Eleven touched the back of his hand lightly, drawing his attention. She tapped her chest the same way she'd done so long ago when he

asked her what 011 meant. "I am Jane."

"That's your real name?" His eyes widened.

Hopper left them alone for the next few minutes as Eleven fetched and showed Mike the article about her mother.

"Mama," she whispered.

"That's your mom..." he breathed, studying the grainy photograph. Then, glancing up at her, he asked, "Have you seen her?"

She nodded.

"Did she remember you?"

Eleven looked away, brow furrowing. "She is trapped in here," she pointed to her own head. "Trapped in a dream circle. The bad men hurt her."

Mike shook his head. "Wow, Elle. I didn't know. I'm sorry."

She observed the genuine sadness troubling his face, and touched his hand again to draw his gaze to her once more. "Mike. It's okay. I am happy here."

He relaxed a little, even offering a smile. Then he glanced at Hopper and grew tense again. "Um, did you find any brothers or sisters?"

Eleven hesitated. Hopper seemed to be reading paperwork at the table, but she couldn't be sure he wasn't listening. She couldn't lie to Mike. Yet, she wasn't ready to reveal Kali to either of them yet either. She hedged her answer. "Mama only had me. But I found a...an aunt."

"You have an aunt?" His brow lifted encouragingly. "Well that's pretty cool."

Eleven smiled. "She's nice."

"That's good. I like my aunt too." Mike shifted on the couch. "Not to change the subject, but can I ask you something else? Not related to this?"

She shrugged.

"Do you hate Max?"

"Hate."

"Yeah, you know, really, really, *really* don't like someone."

Eleven knew what hate was. She had felt hate. She knew Kali harnessed it, but her own was fraught with hurt and longing. In any case, her own had nothing to do with the red-headed newcomer. "No. Do you?"

"Nah. I don't even know her. I didn't want to have her in the the party, but I've accepted it now."

"Me too."

"Lucas and Dustin both like her, but Lucas won that battle. She likes him. She kissed him at the Snow Ball, you know. When I radio'd Lucas to talk about which games we wanted to bring today, it was all he could talk about. He really, really likes her." He grinned a little, giving her a knowing look.

Instantly, Eleven felt immense relief. While the past few interactions had convinced her that Mike felt ambivalence towards Max, she wasn't certain of Max's intentions. Now, however, it all fell into place. The way she and Lucas seemed to gravitate towards one another, the way she seemed to direct most of her questions at him, the reason she and Lucas would vanish into the crowd during every slow song. Why hadn't she seen it before? She'd seen some romantic stuff in her endless days of watching TV, though it didn't often interest her. Still, she suddenly felt much more charitable towards the red-haired girl.

"I am glad for Lucas." She couldn't hide her secret relief from Mike. He'd always been able to read her far too well. So she didn't try.

Mike's grin grew. "Yeah. For the record, I didn't like her because I felt like she was trying to replace you in the party. Since you're back, I don't care if she's there anymore."

Eleven expelled a breath of soft laughter. "We can like her now."

"That's what I'm talking about," Hopper voiced from the corner. "Those kids are way too young for that, same as you. Anyway, let's go, Mike. Time's up."

Mike frowned and gave Eleven a disappointed look. "Sorry."

She followed him as he stood up. "Goodbye Mike."

He cleared his throat and stuck his hands in his pockets awkwardly. "Well...see you."

Hopper smirked at the uncomfortable farewell and grabbed his keys. "Be back in a bit, kiddo. I'll bring a pizza."

She nodded. The two of them walked out the door, and silence engulfed her once more.

"Are you at least trying to understand things from my side?" Hopper asked Mike as they drove through the evening gloom.

"Not really. I don't know what you think is going to happen if I'm alone with her."

"Surely your dad has had the talk with you by now, hasn't he? Or at least kids at school?"

Mike shuddered. "Gross. That's not going to happen."

Hopper nodded. "I believe that, right now. But things don't happen all at once, Mike. Trust me, they build by degrees. And they grow as you get older. One minute you're just friends, then shy crushes, and then with enough time, you're caught up in a whole Romeo-and-Juliet thing where you've convinced yourselves that you're soul mates and you start making dumb teenage decisions like giving up your dreams and futures to be with each other, not being careful with big decisions, things like that. It isn't healthy. I'm trying to buy you guys some time."

"I just missed her." Mike stared out the window. "I didn't know if she'd ever come back. Now she's here, and I just want to be around her."

Hopper thought back to that dread moment in front of the Gate. He saw Eleven's small body trembling with power, levitating in the air while psychic forces surged around her, bursting her blood vessels and draining her life. He shuddered. "I understand, I really do. I thought I might lose her too. But the things she's had to do for us, you know? She's had to be braver and stronger than we had any right to ask of her. She had to lose her childhood to be able to do those things that saved us, Mike. I'm just trying to protect what she has left. And I'm trying to treat you like a man by explaining my reasons, even though I don't owe you any."

For a long time, Mike said nothing. Then, quietly, "Okay. I accept your rules."

"Thanks, kid."

"I'm not your enemy, though. You don't need to worry about me."

Hopper laughed. "You're a teenage boy. After the monsters we've seen, you're my next worst nightmare."

6. The School Problem

{A little from Mike's perspective this time. Let me know what sorts of things you guys would like to see. I've got some stuff in the works, but I'm happy to work in your requests if they fit.}

"Mike. Mike. Miiiike. *Michael Wheeler!*"

Mike jumped, snatched out of his trance by the insistent face of Dustin looming before him. "What?"

"The bell rang? Do you plan to stay here for the next class too?"

Mike shook his head. "Zoned out, sorry."

He stuffed his books into his backpack and slid out of the desk. His English teacher gave him an odd look as he and Dustin filed out behind the straggling students.

Mike and Dustin shared the next class too, so he followed his friend mechanically. His mind wandered back to its previous task - figuring out who best to invite to come with him to Hopper's house. It had to be strategic. Lucas would surely want to bring Max, and Dustin was fun but talkative. Will might be a good option. Quiet, unobtrusive, and eager to get to know Eleven better. They'd all want to go, really, but Mike yearned for the chance to talk to her without all the listening ears. Maybe he could just wait until Hopper was home and go by himself.

The rules annoyed him, despite his agreement to abide them. There was so much he wanted to ask her about, but he wasn't certain what level of trust she had with Hopper and what she was willing to divulge in front of him.

"Hey, Mike," Will greeted as he met them outside their next class.

Mike gave him a nod. "Hey."

Dustin shuffled in ahead of them, so Mike turned back to Will quickly. "Hey, what are you doing after school?"

Will shrugged. "Going home, like usual."

"Want to hang out and ride bikes?"

Will understood. This was the code. They couldn't very well openly discuss going to the home of Hawkins' Chief of Police without raising suspicion, and they couldn't openly discuss Elle's existence. It felt stupid now that the lab had been shut down, but Hopper's continued paranoia had convinced them all that it had to be this way for a while longer.

He looked thoughtful. "I'll have to ask my mom, but yeah. Sounds good. Everyone else coming, too?"

"No, just us." Mike murmured as they filed in and took their seats.

The bell rang and Ms. Graham began the history lecture covering the final stretches of the Civil War. Mike sat back in his seat, leg bouncing impatiently.

It was so hard to focus these days. His mind fled the confines of the classroom as soon as he sat down, and did not return until the bell rang. He used to like school reasonably well. His teachers — especially Mr. Clark — were pretty decent, the subjects were interesting, and he loved AV Club. But when his world fell apart last November, things started to change. For the past year, school had become a begrudging distraction. He did it because it was something to do, and he didn't really know how to go forward after the trauma. Very little fascinated him anymore. Nothing they taught him in school came close to explaining the ordeal they'd all gone through.

Now, though, it was even worse. School was no longer a distraction from his pain and loss. Now, it was a chore to endure — an obstacle. He'd not only survived another intense, inexplicable brush with supernatural death, but now he knew that *she* was alive in the world. What relief he'd originally experienced had now turned to ache, and he chafed at the things which kept her from him.

She had come into his life and burrowed deep, with her huge eyes filled with lonely fear and need of someone to trust. She had threaded bits herself into every fiber of him. In the span of his life,

the time he'd cared for her had been but a brief moment, but that moment had forever altered him. When she sacrificed herself for their sake, she'd left a thousand tiny wounds where all those fibers of her had been ripped away. All those wounds struggled to heal. He couldn't make life feel normal again.

But she'd returned. The world stopped spinning the moment she walked through that door, and he still wasn't sure it had started up again.

He needed to be near her. It was the only time he felt whole again. Besides, he wasn't entirely convinced she wasn't going to vanish again and this would all turn out to have been a wild dream.

"Mister Wheeler, would you care to join us?"

Mike winced as Ms. Graham's voice cut through his rumination. "Sorry. What was the question?"

"I didn't ask one, but I was about to give directions. I'm only going to give them once. Are you paying attention?"

Mike nodded.

She told them to get into groups of three and prepare a short presentation on an assigned city where a final battle took place. Dustin and Will appeared at Mike's desk the second she gave the word.

"Mike, what's up with you, man?" Dustin pressured. "You're totally out of it."

Mike sighed. "I'm fine. What's our assignment?"

"She hasn't come around to tell us yet," said Will.

Dustin dragged a desk over by Mike's and sat down. "Hey, you guys want to go to the arcade tonight? Max thinks she can beat her high score on Dig Dug. I don't think that's possible, but should be fun to watch anyway."

Mike grinned. "That would be insane. But I think I have to pass. I

want to finish writing the new campaign." He glanced at Will. "You should go with them."

Will met his glance and shook his head, frowning. "Nah, Jonathan wanted to hang out tonight. I guess your sister's busy."

Dustin grimaced. "You're leaving me alone with Lucas and Max? No thanks. We'll do it another night."

Mike felt a moment of guilt, seeing Dustin's disappointment. He knew he ought to go, but it sounded as unendurable as school right now. When Elle was free to leave Hopper's cabin, Mike mused, she could join them for things like arcade night. It gave him a weird feeling to picture her with all of them, surrounded by the game machines and other people. He would enjoy showing her how to play some of the games. Would she enjoy playing them?

"Sorry, Dustin," Will said sympathetically.

Dustin glanced at Mike. "You know, if you want to go see your girlfriend you can just say that. I don't mind. I mean, I get it."

"She's not my girlfriend."

"Riiight." Dustin rolled his eyes and exchanged a glance with Will, who laughed. "Sure, Mike."

"What? She's not. She's... I don't really know what she is." He hadn't told them about the kiss a year ago, and he definitely hadn't told them about the Snow Ball, despite Lucas' eager revelation of his own. But apparently they had made their own observations, and come to their own conclusions.

"Okay, but you can't convince me that you aren't planning on seeing her every chance you get. Like a boyfriend does with his girlfriend."

"She's one of us. I'd do the same for any of you. Have done, actually."

Will met his glance again and gave a little nod. Mike had dedicated himself to Will's cause twice now. He wasn't about to leave any of his party members behind just because they were temporarily trapped or otherwise cut off from the rest of the group.

"Gentlemen, you have Vicksburg," Ms Graham announced, coming up behind them.

The boys reluctantly opened their textbooks and began preparing their presentation. Mike forced himself to focus for the sake of the group, and managed to survive the rest of the school day with the hope of what came after.

...

Hopper wasn't thrilled to see him. Mike saw that right away.

"Can I help you?" Asked Florence, the secretary at the police station.

Mike had already met Hopper's eye as he rifled through his deputy's stack of paperwork.

"Uh, can I talk to the Chief?" Mike asked her awkwardly.

She blinked, a passive, unimpressed look on her face. "Sure, kid." Spinning on her chair, she signaled Hopper who had already begun to walk over.

"The Wheeler boy and the Byers boy want to see you, Hop," Florence muttered when he got close.

"Yeah, I see that. Thanks, Flo. Come on, boys. Let's go outside."

Mike and Will followed him, both feeling deeply uncomfortable. Mike resented having to seek permission from a gatekeeper to see someone he protected and cared for himself.

"Let me guess," Hopper said when the doors closed behind them. He tapped out a Camel. "You want to go?"

Mike gave him a short, wordless nod.

Hopper didn't say anything for a while. He lit the cigarette and took a long draft, turning his head to exhale. "Both of you?"

Another nod.

He looked at Will. "Your mom okay with this?"

Will offered a half-smile. "Yeah, she said she'd drive us."

"She picking you up?"

"Yeah."

For some reason, this seemed to factor into Hopper's deliberation. Mike could see that it influenced the argument, though he wasn't sure which way.

"I'm following your rules. I'm asking you, and I'm bringing someone along."

"Wish you'd wait until I'm off."

That was the whole point of bringing Will, Mike wanted to retort. He didn't want Hopper there. His presence changed the mood. Best not to say anything to that effect, though.

"What's your mom doing after she drops you off?" Hopper asked Will. "She working an evening shift?"

Will shook his head. "No. I — I don't know what she was going to do. I didn't think to ask."

"Fine," Hopper sighed. "Go. But try to do something productive, eh? Maybe run through some math puzzles or something that actually develops the brain. Don't just babble about wizard crap, okay?"

Mike rolled his eyes. Hopper could impose his two rules about when visiting hours opened, but he couldn't dictate what the conversation had to be about. "Thanks," he told the chief anyway and tugged on Will's coat. "Come on."

They climbed on their bikes and left Hopper standing outside the police station, nursing his cigarette. Mike could feel the man's eyes on the back of his head as he peddled away. Strange, these feelings of rivalry. Eleven was the strongest, bravest, most capable person he knew — why did two males feel suspicious of one another, as if the care and keeping of her were a competition? She had survived deadly

situations all by herself. She didn't need them.

More than that, Hopper and Mike had every reason to respect one another. They had helped each other and worked in tandem to help Will throughout that long day and night in the Lab and at the Byer's house. They had been allies then.

Still, Mike struggled against the impulse to resent Hopper's control in Eleven's life.

He and Will biked back to his house, where they waited for Will's mom to get off work and come pick them up. They puttered around Mike's basement a little — Will trying to ask questions about the upcoming campaign and Mike deflecting. Mike asked Will about the girl he'd danced with at the Snow Ball, but Will didn't have much follow-up to discuss.

They did not talk about the Mindflyer, or Will's subjection to him. They didn't talk about Bob, or any of the harrowing things they'd been through a month ago. These things didn't need to be discussed. Mike felt closer to Will because of the ordeal, having stuck by his side for almost every part of it. But he knew Will was deeply self-conscious and not ready to address what had happened.

Finally Will's mom arrived.

Mike's heart began to beat a little faster as they climbed in and she drove off. He listened idly as she tried to make conversation with Will, who hedged his answers if ever her questions made him uncomfortable. Towards Mike, she was friendly and tremendously warm — had been since the incident. Mike appreciated her kindness. In some ways he felt closer to her than his own mother. His mom had been there for him a year ago when Will was missing, but everything else had departed so far from her ability to understand. Far too much had happened that he could never tell her. Joyce knew it all, though. She had been through it right along side them — had suffered as much as any of them.

When they arrived at the cabin, she got out of the car with them.

Will gave his mother a wary look. "You don't have to walk me to the

door."

"Maybe this has nothing to do with you and I just want to say hi to her myself," Joyce teased good-naturedly.

Mike produced Hopper's secret knock, and they heard the locks slide open on the other side. His anticipation sent strange, nervous feelings throughout his body.

He opened the door.

And she was there, waiting for them.

Not scared and wet in the rain, not worried and murderous among strewn paper and broken glass, not bewildered and breathless in the midst of their dancing peers. Just Eleven. Pleased, eager, relaxed.

Sweet relief flooded him again at the sight of her, alive and real and whole. She waited for them to all enter, but he saw how her eyes illuminated and knew she had experienced the same rush of joy.

She looked so different from when he'd first met her a year ago. She had floppy, curly hair and actual clothes, but the differences went beyond the superficial too. She was less vulnerable, less scared. While she still conveyed a sense of caution and uncertainty, she didn't seem lost anymore. Whatever she'd gone through this last year, it had changed her.

"Hi, Sweetie," Joyce said affectionately when they got inside.

Eleven went to her and fell into Joyce's embrace. They both seemed to savor this moment, Joyce looking every bit as happy about it as Elle.

"How are you holding up?"

Eleven pulled back and nodded. "I'm alright."

"Is it okay that the boys wanted to visit you today? Hopper gave them permission, but did anyone ask you?"

Eleven glanced at them, her eye meeting Mike's. A shy sort of smile

worked its way across her face. "I'm glad they are here."

"Good." Joyce sounded satisfied. "Well, don't let them give you any trouble, okay? Remember, boys, Jane may be stronger than both of you combined but you treat her like a lady, got it? My sons will be gentlemen."

Mike enjoyed being counted among her sons, but he mentally stumbled over the name *Jane*. He'd heard Mrs. Byers use it before, but it didn't sound right, yet. It didn't apply to the girl in front of him. She wasn't *Jane*, she was Elle. Hopefully a year would be enough time for him to get used to calling her something else — though to be honest, he didn't really want to.

Will rolled his eyes. "*Mom*," he complained.

Joyce grinned. "Alright, well I'll leave you to it, then. Jane, we need to plan a girls day, don't you think? I'll get work off and come here. Would you like that?"

Eleven nodded, her eyes widening at the prospect. "Yes!"

"Perfect. Well, I'll see you boys later this evening. Have fun."

When the door closed behind Joyce, Elle turned to them. She gave Will a quick hug first, though both seemed a bit awkward about it.

"H-Hi, Elle," Will stammered a little as she pulled away.

They were still trying to figure out how to relate to one another, Mike knew.

Then it was Mike's turn. Her body fit snugly against his when she came in for the hug, and his heart filled to bursting. It still boggled his mind that he could be this close to a girl, and in some ways made him feel awkward, but then she wasn't just any girl. It was *her*. And it was good to be this close to her.

"Mike," she breathed.

"I'm sorry I couldn't call," he said as they parted. "To tell you we were coming. Hopper still doesn't like me radio'ing you very much."

"He sent a signal. And I saw."

Mike glanced at Will, who gave him a wide-eyed look of bewilderment. Exactly how her powers worked were still a mystery to them. Mike knew that she could find people, as she had found Will and Barb's body, but what did that mean? Will had said that he knew she was there, in the Upside Down, though he couldn't see her. He felt a pressure on his hand and heard a soft voice encouraging him, telling him his mother was coming. But he'd also been in a state of delirium, and thought he'd dreamed it until hearing the whole story later.

Mike had his moments when it felt like she was right beside him, though she never was. Were those the moments that she saw him?

"So what have you been up to all day?" Mike asked as she led them over to the couch.

The three of them sank into the cushions.

"Reading," she motioned to the book shelf. "And TV."

"Is that what you've been doing all year?"

She nodded, then hesitated and glanced around the cabin. "Sometimes puzzles too."

"As much as I love to stay home from school, it sounds like that would get boring after a whole year of it," Mike decided.

Will grimaced in agreement. "Yeah, daytime TV is pretty bad. He should at least get you a VCR. Then you could rent videos."

"We could show you Star Wars," Mike said with sudden enthusiasm.

Will laughed. "Yeah, then you'd understand Dustin's Wookiee sound."

Eleven looked perplexed. "VCR?"

"It's this machine that plays movies," Mike explained. "So you can choose what you want to watch on the TV whenever you want."

Will looked around the little cabin. "Maybe we should get her some movies for Christmas. There's not much here."

Mike nodded. "That's a good idea. I wanted to see if Keith would let me sweep at the arcade or something so I could save up to get her a supercom. It'd be way easier to communicate if she had one too. But maybe movies are a better idea."

"You want to get a job?" Will asked, aghast. "We're only 13!"

"So? Lucas earned money all summer mowing lawns. I can't mow lawns now but I'm sure I could do something."

"You'd have to do a lot of sweeping to make enough for a supercom."

Mike knew it was true. It had been a pipe dream anyway. He doubted Hopper would let them communicate through it, despite knowing that throughout the entire ordeal from last year and this one, no one from the lab had picked up on the chatter happening between the four of them. It would be safe, he was sure of it, but he also knew Hopper wouldn't take the risk.

He glanced at Eleven. "Will's right, I don't know if I can do it."

Her brow had that little furrow between it, that look of puzzled concentration she always had when she tried to decipher his expressions. "It's all right," she said. "I can hear you."

But he couldn't hear her, and that was the whole problem. But he wasn't going to say it front of Will.

Will studied her intently. "How does that work?" He asked, venturing his question with a note of caution. "How do you hear these things? How do you see?"

Eleven gave him her attention, her furrowed concentration deepening. "I have to focus. Then, it's dark."

Mike glanced around her tiny cabin. It didn't look like Hopper had set up any kind of standing sensory deprivation tank.

"Dark like the Upside Down?" Will asked.

"No." She shook her head slightly. "Like Nowhere. There is nothing, only black. If I am looking for someone, I can find them there. I can hear them and see them. I know where they are."

"So when I was in the Upside Down, that's how you find me?"

"She saw you in Castle Byers," Mike offered, hoping to convey the coolness of this fact. He still remembered how awesome it had been when she'd uttered those words, sending them like electricity through the entire tense group of them gathered around that kiddie pool. And then Will's voice had come over the radio. Mike remembered, and got the chills all over again.

Eleven nodded.

Will shook his head, his eyes wide. "That's...that's so weird. And so cool."

"But, you don't have a sensory deprivation tank here," said Mike, deciding to broach the subject. "So how do you find people now? How do you hear me? Through the radio?"

She shrugged a little and looked away. "I'm getting better. I don't need the bath anymore."

Mike sensed a much larger story lay beneath the surface here. Since her return, he'd felt she had a whole new set of experiences that had changed her, but he didn't know how to draw them out of her. He realized, with a sting of regret, that he didn't know much about her life at all, except the little time they'd been together last year. He knew that she'd been experimented on in Hawkins Lab, and that those experiments had caused her to accidentally open the gate to the Upside Down. But the specifics of what had been done to her, of her confused relationship to Dr. Brenner, what life had been like growing up surrounded by adults studying her like a lab rat — he didn't really know anything about all that.

He'd watched Dr. Brenner cradle her in his arms that night at the school, heard her utter *Papa*, watched something meaningful pass between them before she rejected his paternal promises and reached out for Mike. He shuddered at the memory. It had been a terrible

moment, unable to get to her when she called for him in her need.

He dragged himself out of these thoughts and tried to focus on her again. Aside from what he did not know about her life before she met him, he also did not know what this last year consisted of, or how it came to be that she found them in Will's house, hunted by demodogs.

So much he wanted to learn.

Will seemed eager to take advantage of his chance to ask his own questions of her. His shyness began to recede by degrees.

"So, are you going to come to school with us next year? When Hopper decides it's safe, I mean."

Her wide eyes flicked between Mike and Will, and again she shrugged. "I don't know."

"Did they teach you much at the lab? Did you go to school there?"

"Not school." She shook her head.

Mike frowned. "I didn't think about that. I wonder what grade you'd be in. You have to be with us — you're our age, and everything, they gotta put you with us. I know you can read and write, but they probably didn't teach you anything about algebra or geography or biology or any of that stuff, did they?"

She drew her knees up to her chest and rested her chin on them. "Not much."

"Yikes," said Will. "That's going to be tough. Hopper should get you a tutor so you can catch up before high school."

"Yes," Mike agreed, knowing immediately that was the answer. Hopper might not go for it — who could tutor her? That would mean allowing someone else in the world to know of her existence, which no one was very comfortable with. It needed to be good at teaching, to help her learn everything she needed to. Her mind was powerful. Mike felt sure she could do it. "Maybe Nancy can be your tutor. She's super smart."

Eleven offered a small half-smile at the idea, though remained characteristically silent.

Will nodded. "Yeah, and Jonathan could come with. He's pretty good at school too."

It would be incredibly weird to have her at school with them, Mike decided. Good, but weird. How would she get along with the other kids? What about the classes she'd inevitably have without anyone from the party? That thought made him nervous for her sake.

"We'll prepare you the best we can ourselves," he decided. "Although, we don't know the high school scene very well ourselves either. But at least Nancy and Jonathan would be there. They might be seniors and therefore forbidden to talk to freshman, but at least they could keep an eye on you."

Will gave him a strange look. "Mike, hasn't she proven that she can take care of herself?"

Mike met Eleven's glance. "Yeah, of course, against monsters and government bad guys and bullies trying to kill me, but what about the every day stuff? She can't go using her powers for random stuff in high school. We aren't exactly the popular kids, but even we have some understanding of what's social suicide. Elle doesn't."

Will considered that, nodding slowly. "Max is pretty cool. She could probably help her better than we can."

Again, Eleven and Mike met each other's eyes, and he grinned a little at the understanding that passed between them. Elle didn't love the idea of getting advice from Max, but they had agreed to be okay with the new party member now.

"I can fit in," she assured him.

"You don't have to fit in with everyone — in fact, most of them are total buttheads that aren't worthy of you," Mike said quickly. "But just how to deal with stupid people without breaking their arms. Or how to survive a teacher that plays favorites, and you aren't a favorite. Things like that. How to deal with people who will try to find reasons

to reject you."

A shadow passed over Elle's face as she fell into deep thought. Her eyes drifted off with some thought or memory locked in the secret vault of her infinite mind. Mike wanted to know what it was, but he didn't know how to ask.

"Outcasts," she muttered.

"What?"

Her dark eyes met his again and he saw a door shut in them. She shook her head. "I don't know if he will let me go to school."

"Do you think he'd home school?" Will asked. "I mean, if you're going to grow up to be semi-normal, you'll need to know some basic things."

She shrugged again. All questions she had no answer for at this time.

Will stood up. "Is it okay if I use your bathroom? Then we should play a game or something."

Mike watched him go with a twinge of concern. He still wasn't convinced the Mindflyer had let Will go completely, and sometimes Mike still worried when Will went off by himself. That was silly, though, and he knew it. He didn't want to become as paranoid as Will's mom.

Eleven shifted, so he returned his attention back to her. She knelt up on the cushions, leaning into him a little, her face near his. His heart tripped into an unsteady beat at the sudden proximity.

"Mike," she whispered.

He exhaled an unsteady breath. He'd missed the sound of his name on her lips. "Yeah?"

Her eyes held his in liquid darkness, pools of infinity hiding something important and urgent beneath.

"I'm scared."

He blinked, alarmed and immediately on edge. "Why? The Mindflayer?"

She shook her head. "About the future. School. The Bad Men. All of it."

"The Bad Men? But they're gone, aren't they?"

She looked away, her brow furrowing again. "I don't know."

"Hey." He took her hand in his. "Hopper, he's doing a good job of making sure they never find you. And as for the rest of it, you won't be alone. We will all be there, right beside you. I'll be there. Besides, that's more than a year away, if it even happens. We don't have to worry about that right now."

Her gaze traveled to their hands. Again he got the distinct feeling there was so much more she wasn't saying.

"Elle?"

She glanced up again.

He drew in a deep breath. "What happened to you? That night, with the demogorgon. And ever since."

A faraway look stole across her face once more. She sat back down again, but left her hand in his. Her fingers twitched against his own. "I went to the Upside Down."

"You did? Was the demogorgon with you?"

"No."

"That's good at least. How did you get out?"

"A...a hole. Like a gate."

"Why didn't you come home?" The ache that burned in his chest became very real very quickly. He prayed that Will stayed in the bathroom a little longer.

She frowned. "I put you in danger. You were not safe with me. The bad men would have hurt you."

Mike wanted to argue that safety was overrated. The last year had been safe, and miserable. She came into his life during a period of incredible danger, and had vanished to make things safe again. Only a resurgence of that danger had brought her back. He didn't want to say it now, but he'd gladly accept threats from the Upside Down every day if it meant she stayed in his life.

"I would have been willing to take the risk," he said softly.

"And your family?"

The door to the bathroom opened again, and Mike felt guilty over how disappointed he was to have Will back. He decided to persist, and see if she'd talk in his presence anyway.

"After you got out of the Upside Down, what did you do?"

Will sat down again, saying nothing. Eleven watched him, hesitated, and then forged ahead with her answer.

"I hid in the woods."

"In the snow? How did you survive that?"

"I found a coat and hat."

Mike shook his head, baffled and amazed. She was a survivor, alright. "And then Hopper found you?"

"Yes."

"And you've been here ever since?"

She shrugged. It wasn't a very definitive answer, and he didn't feel fully convinced by it. In fact, he knew it wasn't strictly true. Hopper had been surprised to see her — asked where she'd been. Obviously then she'd not been home, where he expected her. But there was something in that missing piece that she didn't want to talk about.

"And how did you know we were in trouble?"

"I saw you..." she hesitated again, glancing at Will and then away again quickly. "At the lab. You were not safe."

Mike shuddered at the memory. It was the most fear he had ever felt, including what had happened last year. He still had nightmares about it sometimes. He couldn't look at Will. Because they never talked about what happened, Mike had no idea if Will remembered or understood the role he played in what happened at the lab.

Will didn't say anything, and Eleven seemed restless. She slid her hand from Mike's and stood up, shuffling off to the kitchen to pour herself a glass of water.

"So...uh...you guys want to play a game, or something?" Will asked after a few minutes of heavy silence.

Mike agreed, and produced the deck of cards he'd slid into his jacket pocket back in his basement. Eleven also seemed relieved to have something else to do and think about. They gathered around the table and explained the game Gin to her. She caught on quickly.

Whenever the round ended and Will shuffled the cards in preparation for the next, Mike's hand found hers under the privacy of the table. Their fingers intertwined for those brief moments, and he felt a rush of emotions anew each time. Maybe Hopper was right to impose his rules. Mike really wanted to kiss her again, but was kept at bay by the presence of his friend.

Darkness had fallen by the time they heard cars approaching. They'd long since finished their game and had returned to the couch to watch TV. Elle's head rested on Mike's shoulder, but it jerked up at the sound of engines shutting off. She frowned.

"No signal," she whispered.

Mike could feel how tense she'd gotten. She stood up and went to the window, peeking out through a sliver of curtain.

He and Will turned around on the couch.

"Is it Hopper?" Mike asked.

She relaxed and nodded. "And Will's mother."

Hopper's secret knock thundered through the small cabin in short order, and Eleven opened the door for them.

"Hey, kiddo," he said, ruffling her hair. "Have a good time tonight?"

She nodded. "You're late."

"Yeah, sorry about that. Joyce needed a bit of distraction tonight so I took her to get some ice cream. I brought you a cookie though. Want it?"

She snatched it out of his hand and moved around him to give Joyce a quick hug.

Mike stood up. Will followed suit.

"Boys," said Hopper. "Everything good here?"

"Yeah." Will nodded. "We had a good time. We taught Eleven how to play Gin."

"What are you, old ladies?" Hopper laughed.

Mike frowned. "Well it's not like you have a lot of options here."

"I'm kidding, alright? I'm glad you didn't just play your dragon game."

Eleven returned to her friends — to Mike's side, though she did not touch him. "I won."

"A few times, actually," Will said, grinning.

Joyce motioned to him, and he went to his mother. "Hey, how would you boys feel about coming over for a visit on Christmas Day, in the afternoon when all the mayhem of the morning is over?"

Mike's felt something within him leap at the thought. He glanced at Elle in surprise. "That would be great!"

"Yeah," Will agreed. "She probably hasn't had a real Christmas anyway."

"Well we will have our own Christmas Eve," Hopper explained. "But then it'd probably be nice to have some company later in the day. Don't you think, kid?"

Eleven nodded, grinning a little.

"Mike, you'll have to make sure it's alright with your parents," Joyce told him.

Mike didn't give that a second thought. He would convince them, whatever it took. "I will. They won't have a problem with it."

"It's settled then." Joyce gave Hopper a parting squeeze on the arm. "Thanks for the ice cream, and the talk. I needed it."

"I know," said Hopper. "Me too."

Mike never knew how to say goodbye to Eleven now. He decided on a hug this time. "Don't worry," he told her softly as she pressed in close. "You're safe, we're safe. Everything will be alright."

She said nothing, but she didn't need to. He knew she had listened.

"Alright, five second rule," Hopper cut in.

Eleven jumped away quickly, looking sheepish.

"Come on, boys, it's late and you've got school tomorrow," said Joyce.

Mike cringed at the thought. Another day of drudgery — and he probably had to make good on his promise to go to the arcade with Dustin. Still, he left a little lighter this time, knowing that Christmas break was only days away. He'd have to figure out how to make it happen, but he intended to be here with her as often as his school-free days, and her new father, would allow.

7. Christmas

{Hey everyone! Thanks for the reviews! I really appreciate the feedback and I'm sorry FF doesn't have an easy reply function so I can interact better. Anyway, sorry about the delay on this - Star Wars got me a little distracted. But here's a Christmas chapter for your holiday season ;) }

Eleven knew the moment Hopper plugged in the lights: a Christmas Tree was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen. It changed the whole atmosphere of their little home. A soft, multi-colored glow illuminated the space just enough. The tinsel twinkled and winked under the glimmer of the lights, glass baubles reflecting their subtle shine.

"So," Hopper said, coming to sit next to her on the couch. "What do you think? Pretty cozy, huh?"

She nodded, feeling as happy and glowy as the tree. "It's beautiful."

"So we'll put presents under there, and on Christmas morning, you get to open them."

"Presents?" She looked up at him. "But I can't get you a present."

Hopper laughed and put a gentle arm around her. "Don't worry about me, kid, I haven't needed a Christmas present for a long time. They will be yours. But no peeking, okay? None of this shaking the box thing to try to guess what's inside. When you see a present show up under that tree you leave it alone until Christmas, got it?"

Again, she nodded. Only the commercials she'd seen on TV lately have her any context for Christmas or presents. She knew that kids got wildly excited about both, but right now the best part about all of it was just the tree. She felt warmer just looking at it.

It brought a new feeling of enchantment and the pleasing smell of pine into the little house. It made her feel less lonely during the day, and more gently inclined towards Hopper in the evening. He didn't want it on during the day, but sometimes she crawled under and

plugged it in anyway. One time, after doing this, she turned over beneath the tree and gazed up through the illuminated tangle of branches and light. She lost herself in wonder, and stayed there for a peacefully long time.

It seemed to put Hopper in a better mood too. Her relationship with him hadn't magically become perfect after their experience at the Gate, but they did have a deeper appreciation for one another now. And the softly glowing embers of the holiday season healed whatever frustration might have come up from her ongoing captivity. When he came home in the evenings, his mood quickly turned from weary to cheerful and affectionate.

One night, he even showed up after work with Mike in tow, as a surprise. It had been a day when she felt particularly isolated, especially after checking on her mother in the Void, and had a throbbing need to be near someone. So his unexpected appearance was almost too perfect to bear. Mike told her about sledding and other winter activities he and the others were doing. Hopper promised her she'd get to experience that too one day. After dinner, Hopper let her get out of cleaning, and she took Mike over to the Christmas tree where she got on the ground and slid beneath it, motioning for him to do the same. To his credit, he did so without question. They lay there, head to head, staring up at the labyrinth of branches and multi-colored lights.

He marveled. "I used to do this when I was little. I haven't thought about it in so long."

"Magical," she whispered, testing the new word.

"Yeah," said Mike, glancing over at her. "Magical."

He'd stayed late that night. Hopper left them alone on the couch while he sat at the table reading through a file. Mike was able to secretly take her hand and wind his fingers through hers while they watched a Christmas special. That had been a good night, and she thanked Hopper when he got back from taking Mike home. He hugged her and kissed the top of her head.

They still annoyed one another, and he still kept Mike away when he

could, which made her angry. But beneath all that superficial tension she now felt a sense of belonging and security. Even when they argued, she knew he cared. In her darkest dreams, she saw the face of Papa loom before her and felt the icy chill of fear when she remembered that he might be alive in the world. When this happened, she'd wake up shivering and heartbroken. But inevitably, Hopper would be there in the morning with breakfast and an easy smile, his presence reassuring and soothing away the ache.

Every night after dinner, she'd cocoon herself in a big comforter while he read to her. Back in her cell in the Lab, with not even a blanket on her spartan bed, she'd faded away with loneliness. Papa spent time with her when she was little, teaching her letters and singing little nursery rhymes with her — and she'd mistakenly latched onto this as evidence of his love for her. But the older she got, the less frequently he came to visit. She began to realize that all of his attention before had only been to prepare her with the necessary knowledge for the experiments. He only visited when it was time for a test. And he ignored her pain and fear, expecting her to submit obediently to all of it. Her feelings were a nuisance in the way of his goals, and he only bestowed affection as a reward when the experiment results pleased him. She could purchase small snippets of approval with the controlled use of her power, and so she did. It was all she had.

Life had become a bleak repetition of terrifying experiments followed by crushing isolation, and if she resisted, she was punished. She might have died of a starved heart had she remained there.

Now, everything was so different. Hopper's voice eased the uncertainty about Papa's existence lurking within her, instead transmitting holiday ghost stories and legends of fat flying men delivering presents. He had given her a home, given her safety. She had people in her life who wanted to be with her, who eagerly gave the affection she had so long craved. A man had come into her world, more real and more fatherly than the scientist who raised her. After all this time and all that they'd been through, she realized that she loved him. He belonged to her, and she to him. He was her father.

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"Merry Christmas, kiddo," Hopper greeted as he came through the door.

Eleven slid down off the back of the couch, where she'd been alertly perched since receiving his signal. She waited, watching him peel off his coat and hang his hat on the peg. Christmas Eve had finally arrived, and he'd been promising her something special on this night for a while now.

He chuckled, seeing her barely contained anticipation. "You have a good day?"

She shrugged, following him to the kitchen.

He didn't mind her noncommittal answer. "Mine was interesting. Snow like this always brings out the worst in drivers. Your friends haven't fared much better on their bikes. Oh—don't worry, they're fine. Nah, it was some other kid on a bike that slid on a patch of ice and broke his arm. We didn't really need to get involved in that one, except that it happened on school property, and even though the school is closed for the break the parents were upset and made it this whole legal issue..."

She listened as he went on about his day, her steady gaze never leaving him as he got himself a drink. She wanted to fidget, wanted to drum her fingers on the table, wanted to bounce, *something* to expend the nervous energy inside her. But she didn't. She held still and waited for him to stop stalling.

Finally he set his glass on the table and faced her. "I think this night calls for a bit of music, don't you?"

She grinned and nodded.

At the record player, he retrieved an album with a smiling man in a red hat on the front.

"It's not Christmas Eve without a little Bing," he explained, guiding the needle onto the spinning vinyl.

A melodious male voice filled the little cabin, backed up by women singing in harmony. Eleven liked it, and not just because she

recognized it as the start of the night's festivities.

"So, dinner first, yeah?" Hopper asked.

She bobbed her head once in silent agreement.

He boogied his way through the dinner preparation, reacting to the songs in his endearingly awkward way. Eleven smiled. Whatever it was that leaked into people and made them want to move to music, she didn't understand. But she saw that they loved it, and remembered how Mike and Dustin had helped her dance and how alive she'd felt. Is that what Hopper felt too?

She got the utensils and cups, bringing them to the table while he prepared everything else. The food smelled better than usual. Much better than the tinfoil dinners they usually had.

"Flo?" She asked as he set enormous plates of food on the table.

"Nope. Take-out. I was able to get there before they closed for the evening. Special night calls for special food."

She slid into her seat and eyed the generous fare. It was more food than she'd ever eaten at a single sitting, and much of it she didn't recognize.

"Those are sweet potatoes, and don't look at them like that, huh? At least not until you've tried them," Hopper murmured, taking a heaping forkful from his own plate.

Eleven enjoyed the freedom of being able to choose what she ate, and frequently shunned the unpleasant flavors despite Hopper's insistence. Tonight, however, she humored him and tasted a bit of everything. It all turned out to be pretty good, so she didn't have trouble keeping pace.

After eating, they were both too full to move much. For once, he didn't require them to clean up after. Instead, they both staggered to the couches where they collapsed and stretched their bloated bellies out. It was an uncomfortable feeling, but Eleven relished it. At the lab, she was only ever given small, scientifically determined portions of flavorless food, designed to keep her just healthy enough and

nothing more. Food was a sweet part of being free — all of it an adventure, even if she always returned to what she loved best.

The album ended and they listened to the sound of the needle dragging over empty record.

"You know," Hopper said slowly. "Hawkins is lit up real pretty right now with all the Christmas lights."

She glanced at the tree, trying to imagine what he meant.

"If you're up for it, we could take a drive to see them. Yeah? What do you think?"

Her head snapped back around to stare at him as her body forgot its fullness and sat up. "Take a drive?"

He chuckled. "That's right. Field trip. We won't talk to anyone, we won't get out of the car, we'll bundle you up so no one could recognize you, and we'll come straight home after. Agreed?"

"Yes," she said breathlessly, scrambling to her feet. Her heart tripped along a merry gallop in her chest and she snatched up her coat. Was this why everyone loved Christmas? Was this what they meant when they talked about the *magic* of the season? Because this felt like nothing short of a miracle.

Hopper hauled himself to his feet too and stopped the record player. He put on his own coat again, as well as his hat. Ready, he turned his attention to her. In addition to her usual coat, he supplied her with a thick scarf and a furry hat, both effective at ensuring only her nose and eyes were visible. She felt snug. Safe.

Outside, the cold air almost hurt to inhale. The snow had finally fallen in earnest today, piling up around the edges of the cabin and twiggy, leafless trees. Moonlight reflected off the gauzy white surface, illuminating the night to almost perfect visibility.

Eleven felt electricity in the air, as if anything were possible.

The wheels of the truck crunched over the newly fallen snow as they drove into the night. The chilly, cavernous cab soon became warm

and pleasant, heat flooding up from near the feet.

She'd only ridden in this truck a handful of times. The first time she'd had everyone else with her, all of them nervous throughout the ride from the junkyard to the Byers house. But the rest of the times, she'd been alone in the car with just Hopper. And that had been only three — when he first brought her home to this cabin, when he took her to the lab, and when he brought her back. Somehow, though, the truck and its smoke-scented interior felt as familiar as Hopper himself. It had become an extension of him.

She glanced over at him, and he did the same to her. A smile passed from one to the other and she looked out the window again.

Whatever she'd tried to picture when he described it, it was no where near as beautiful as the sight that met her when they got into town.

Hawkins Main Street had been strung with lights, and every tree along it wrapped to the tiniest branch. Everything sparkled, everything glowed. The snowy streets were empty, giving it the feeling of a private dreamscape. As they drove through neighborhoods, she marveled at the houses outlined in lights - some white, some colorful, some hung down like icicles. A few had gone so far as to put lights on their bushes and trees. Others placed figures of people on the lawn.

"What's that?" She asked, pointing at a collection of these figures assembled around what looked like a baby in a wooden box.

"It's a story people tell each other at Christmas time," Hopper explained half-heartedly. "Has to do with God and all that. Christmas is technically celebrating the birth of that baby."

Eleven didn't understand anything about God, but she knew that some people got really worked up about it. Sometimes men on the TV gave impassioned speeches about this concept, about some all-powerful man who would at times punish and other times bless, who seemed have ultimate control over all happenings. The few times she'd listened to it, her skin crawled with the creepy feeling they were describing Papa, and she'd change the channel immediately. Hopper's mention of it now sparked no curiosity at all. She moved on

to the next unusual sight.

"What's that?"

"That's a snowman. People roll up the snow in balls like that to make it look like a person — sorta."

"Why?" Whoever had made it hadn't succeeded. It wasn't so much a person as bizarre creature emerging from the snow, with twiggy arms and an asymmetrical face, three orbs stacked vertically and topped with a scarf and hat.

Hopper shrugged. "You know, for fun."

People did odd things in the name of fun, she decided.

They saw more snowmen in other neighborhoods, and so many lights as to utterly take her breath away.

Hopper drove down Mike's street too. She sat up when she recognized the neighborhood, pressing her face against the glass so she wouldn't miss it. His house had lights too — big, colorful ones climbing along the edges and around the door. A circle of fluffy branches and shiny baubles hung in the center of the front door. The curtains of the main window were parted slightly, and from within she could see the sparkle of their own tree.

It looked happy and bright, like it contained something sweet within it.

"You'll see him tomorrow," Hopper reminded her.

She made herself look at the next house instead of craning her neck to keep Mike's in view. Thoughts of his basement filled her mind, and she wondered how his family had decorated their Christmas tree. What would it be like to be there tonight? With Nancy and Mike, their little sister and the parents she'd never met. Mike said his mother was a good cook — had she made a meal as enormous as Hopper had brought home? What were they doing right now?

These thoughts and questions lingered for a few more streets, but eventually faded under the relentless onslaught of new and beautiful

sights.

By the time they headed home, her heart was full to bursting.

"So," said Hopper. "What did you think? Good?"

She nodded, giving him a huge grin. "Beautiful."

He seemed pleased with this response, and with his role in bringing about her happiness tonight. They drove in relative silence a little while longer.

Then, slowly, he ventured a question. "Hey, kid, I gotta ask you about something."

She tore her gaze from the snowy wilderness outside and looked at him.

"You're okay with Will's mom, right? You like her?"

Eleven didn't hesitate. "Yes. She's nice."

Hopper nodded. "I figured, but I needed to know for sure. Cuz I'd like it if she came around more often — for your sake, you know? You need a good female influence in your life, not just a curmudgeon like me."

"C-curmudgeon?"

"You can look it up when we get home, but it just basically means grump."

Eleven considered his proposal. Something inside her craved the motherly love that Joyce exuded every time they embraced. She wanted the chance to hug her more often, to experience it again and again. It was an echo of whatever she had hoped to find in tracking down Mama.

Besides, she could not forget the words of kindness Joyce had given her in preparation for the Bath. No one had ever talked to her that way. The Bath had been a terrible ordeal every time they made her do it; entering the Void made her feel horribly vulnerable and alone.

She dreaded it every time. But that night, she volunteered. She just wanted to help her friends find Will, and she wanted to right the wrong she'd committed by opening the Gate. The only thing left to do then was steel herself against the old dread that churned in her stomach.

But then came Joyce, speaking softly, murmuring reassuring things and comforting her with promises that she could abort at any time. No one had ever given her permission to feel scared before. They had always punished her for becoming too frightened to continue. No one had ever promised to be there to soothe her fear if it became overwhelming. And she had kept her promise. Comfort did come when Eleven needed it, terrified in the face of Barb's gruesome corpse. Joyce had distantly delivered that maternal balm which gave her courage to continue.

Eleven had loved her from that moment onward.

So of course she didn't mind if she saw Joyce more often. It seemed an odd question to ask.

"I like her. She can come."

Hopper seemed satisfied enough by this answer. He nodded. "Good, that's good. Nancy too, I mean. She's...maybe not the best influence, but the kid's got guts, I'll give her that. And that new girl the boys are hanging out with. She can come whenever too. No need to ask permission if it's a girl. You need female friends."

Eleven couldn't imagine Nancy or Max volunteering to come spend time with her, and she didn't really understand the motive behind all this anyway. Was this another roundabout way of preventing her from seeing Mike? Why did she need female friends? What was the fundamental difference between male and female association, anyway?

So far, she hadn't seen much behavioral contrast between boys and girls. Not in ways that mattered, really. Both could be cruel and violent, caring and protective, brave and cowardly. Nancy said boys were stupid, but Eleven's experience didn't convince her of that.

She could have simply asked Hopper for the *why* of all this, but it didn't seem to matter much tonight. All that could wait. Tonight, her heart and mind were full of lights and trees and men made of snow.

They arrived back in their cabin where he warmed up some hot cocoa and she changed into her most comfortable pajamas. Sitting together in the glow of their own little tree, sipping liquid warmth, Eleven decided that this was the second best night of her life.

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The next morning dawned quietly, with heavy snow clouds muting the gradual arrival of sunlight. Hopper introduced her to the concept of Christmas morning, with its wonders and marvels. He gave her a few presents in the form of a soft sweater, new books and puzzles, better fitting boots, snow gloves, and the softest, fluffiest blanket she'd ever seen. In a large package he seemed most excited about, she unwrapped a box with a picture of another black box printed on the side. VCR, it read. Her eyes widened and she looked at him.

He shrugged. "So maybe your little nerd friends made a suggestion, and I thought it was a good one. Now I can rent you some educational stuff so you don't have to watch that garbage on TV all the time."

Eleven was deeply pleased by this development, though she had no idea how the machine worked.

After unwrapping her gifts, she felt bad that she had nothing to give Hopper. She knew, mostly from commercials and Christmas specials on TV, that the gift ritual usually worked both ways. She opted for giving him a tight and earnest hug, and a breathless "Thank you."

He cleared his throat a couple times and extracted himself from her embrace. "Let's make breakfast, huh?" He said huskily.

They both went through the motions of morning in a state of agitation. Knowing Mike would be coming later made Eleven feel strangely jumpy and alert. She changed into her new sweater and tried to pass the time by settling down to one of her new puzzles. But there was an energy in the air that made it hard to concentrate. It

came from Hopper too, she felt. He showered and spent some time grooming his beard, then set to fiddling with the VCR. This might be ordinary enough behavior, but all his tiny habits and mannerisms that she'd spent the last year memorizing and analyzing seemed a little off. They didn't talk much, though he kept a record of Christmas music playing at all times.

Did the prospect of opening their secret sanctuary to guests make him that nervous? No, he'd allowed it before, that couldn't be it. Was it her fault? Was her own excitement leaking from her mind, affecting his heartbeat and nervous system? No, she held her emotions firmly in check within the locked vault of her mind. No forces, telekinetic or otherwise, escaped.

Regardless, they both remained in this sort of restless state until shortly after lunch, when they heard the sound of a car approaching in the distance.

Eleven looked up and caught Hopper's eye. She moved around to the window, using a finger to part the curtain and pull back the side of the shade, peeking out. Hopper came up behind her and peeked as well. She grinned up at him.

"They're here."

They came walking through the falling snow, bundled in hats and coats, gloves and boots. Jonathan led them, with Nancy beside him. They stepped over the trip wire. Joyce, Will, and Mike followed suit. As they approached the house, Hopper ruffled her hair and straightened up.

"Showtime, kiddo."

The whole atmosphere changed when the five of them came through the door. Suddenly the little cabin brimmed with the happy sounds of warm greetings and Christmas salutation. Eleven hung back a little and watched them as they peeled off their coats like reptiles shedding their skins, tapping snow off their boots and letting Hopper take the brightly colored packages in their hands to the table. She caught Mike's eye as he performed these tasks. A secret grin passed between them.

Joyce was the first to hug her, though. Eleven nestled into her embrace and felt a hand stroke the back of her head.

"Merry Christmas, Jane," she murmured. Holding her back at little, she searched Eleven's face. "Have you had a good one, so far?"

El nodded, grinning a little. "Yes."

"Hey, you got a VCR!" Will said enthusiastically, spotting Hopper's efforts scattered around the floor by the TV.

Jonathan observed the mess too. "Chief, do you need some help setting it up? Bob showed me how to do ours last year."

Hopper leaned against the back of the couch. "Sure, kid, knock yourself out."

Nancy took Joyce's place in giving Eleven a light hug. "Love the sweater. Is it new?"

"Yes."

"Well, I approve." She winked conspiratorially before moving aside.

Everyone settled in comfortably. Will joined Jonathan on the floor by the TV. Nancy carried the gifts over to the tree. Hopper offered Joyce a glass of wine, which she accepted, and they headed into the kitchen together.

Eleven turned to Mike, who came up beside her with soft eyes and a soft smile. "Merry Christmas, El."

Her gaze fell, heat warming her cheeks a little under the pleasure of his proximity. "Merry Christmas," she returned in a whisper.

Everyone looked so happy. At the lab, Eleven had no concept of family. She didn't know how others lived, and didn't wonder what the scientists around her did when they weren't studying her. The first inkling she'd had of it was in Mike's own living room, staring at his family pictures. She'd determined that most people lived in organized units, usually led by two adults — one male, one female. These conducted the affairs of the group and took care of the young. Since

then, she'd learned more about family and had come to understand that not all families were built the same. Will's family didn't have two adults, for example. Only a mother. Since Hopper had become her father, she herself now belonged to one of these lopsided households as well. Kali had formed her own kind of family unit out of the misfits she'd collected, and Aunt Becky took care of Mama as the only option left to them, clinging to the remains of what was before.

But right now, she had a peculiar certainty that her family was all here, all around. Hopper and Joyce laughed over some shared memory while the two brothers worked on their technical puzzle, guided by Nancy's reading of the manual. With Mike beside her, she had the distinct sensation of completion — nothing at all was missing. Everything was exactly perfect.

She smiled.

"What are you thinking about?" Mike asked.

"Family. My family."

He looked around, nodding. "Yeah. This does feel like a family. At least, this is what family is supposed to feel like. It doesn't always, though."

She allowed him to gently take her hand and lead her over to the vacant couch. "Does yours?"

He laughed a little as they sat, their hands parting again. He angled himself against the armrest so that he faced her. "No way. Take today, for example. My parents are kind of bugged that me and Nancy wanted to see the Byers instead of staying with them all day. They were pretty grumpy when we were getting ready to leave. And trust me, grumpy moms are the *worst*."

Hopper's bad moods usually coincided with her own, and when that happened they provoked one another far too easily. If Mike's encounter with his parents had been anything like that, she understood something of what he meant, though not the part about mothers so much. She vaguely wondered why his parents had been unhappy about the situation. Her experience there had suggested that

they didn't much pay attention to what their children were doing — unless it involved being home when they should have been at school. Maybe it went against their expected holiday ritual, though. Yes, maybe that.

"Hey," Mike said softly, drawing her attention back. "I got something for you. Do you want to open it?"

Eleven knew that he saw her brief flicker of surprise, but quickly replaced it with a shy smile and a nod.

He stood up and went to the tree where his sister had deposited the modest stack of gifts. Among them, he selected the smallest one and brought it back to her.

The package was too little to be a supercom, or even a videotape. Her curiosity piqued, she glanced up at him. He produced that crooked grin she recognized so well, urging her to open it.

So she did. Nimble fingers tore through the paper with minimal effort. Beneath was a small cardboard box with a picture of a tiny piano on it. The piano she recognized from pictures in her thesaurus, but the size of it puzzled her. Weren't they supposed to be bigger?

"It's a music box," Mike said. "Here, take it out and I'll show you."

She withdrew a very small piano made of clear plastic. Inside she saw gold gears and a studded cylinder. On the bottom, it had a crank. Mike gently took it from her hands and turned it over, twisting the crank a few times. The studded cylinder inside began to turn, flicking little bars inside as the studs rolled beneath them. It produced a sweet sound, soft and chiming. The melody was sincere and gentle, inspiring in her feelings both wistful and adoring.

But how did Mike know? He hadn't been there when she found Nancy's music box. He hadn't known how the sound had pierced her aching heart instantly. No one knew about that moment of sadness and longing. It had remained a private secret in her heart. But somehow, Mike had guessed. Or maybe had heard the echo of it somewhere inside her.

This wasn't the same melody, but it was somehow better. She scooped her tiny piano out of his hands and brought it closer, mesmerized by the little keys flashing as the studs lifted them in their turns.

"Do you like it? Is it okay?" Mike asked very quietly.

She met his gaze, those eyes full of worry and hope, full of that selfless kindness she'd recognized that first night in his basement. "Yes," she breathed, drawing the music box in closer to her chest. It had at once become the most precious thing she owned, alongside Hopper's blue bracelet. She gave him her warmest, most sincere smile. "Thank you."

He grinned and looked away, pleased with himself.

She cranked the music box the way he had done, twice more so the music wouldn't stop. It sounded like it came directly from her own heart.

With a start, she realized everyone else had gotten quiet and turned their attention to the music. Sudden self-consciousness flooded through her. People staring at her wasn't an unusual experience, but to be caught in a moment so private and intimate as this made her acutely embarrassed.

"You got her a music box?" Will asked, perplexed.

Mike shrugged. "When I heard it, it reminded me of El. I thought she'd like it. Is it weird?"

"Yeah," Will decided. "I mean, a little. Aren't music boxes for babies?"

Nancy shook her head. "No, it's not weird and they aren't for babies. It's sweet."

Jonathan exchanged a glance with Will that made them both grin. Clearly he agreed more with his brother on this issue.

"If Jane likes it, that's all that matters," Joyce chided. "And if we're starting the gifts, then I've got one to give too. Are you up for it, sweetie? We all wanted to make your first Christmas special."

While Joyce distributed the few other packages to their givers, Eleven stood up and carried the music box to her room. It's little song pittered out as she set it on her nightstand and closed the door behind her. She already felt protective of the tiny object, wanting to hide it away from anyone else who might want to touch it. On her way back to the couch, she caught Hopper's eye. His mouth twitched into a kind of half-smile, which she returned.

She resumed her place next to Mike, and accepted the gift which Joyce immediately placed in her lap.

Hopper didn't look exactly pleased by the makeup she withdrew from the wrapping, but Joyce cajoled him into a chuckle by explaining how she'd never bought a gift for a teenage girl before and wasn't sure what else to get. Nancy gave Eleven a necklace with a delicate little heart on it, along with some hair clips. Jonathan gave her a walkman portable with headphones and two cassettes, the Clash and Rush. He confessed that they were all used, but still functional. Will gave her the first Star Wars movie on VHS.

Joyce gave Hopper a gift too in the form of a new hat and a pack of his favorite Camels.

After the gifts, everyone kind of resumed their tasks from before. The two adults went back to their conversation, and Jonathan went back to the VCR. Will came over to El and Mike, revealing something else — a slim manila envelope which he pushed into her hands, glancing furtively at the others to ensure their distraction.

Eleven withdrew a single sheet of paper from inside.

"You drew this?" Mike asked softly.

Will nodded.

It was of her, reaching through a sea of monsters and tentacles, including the demogorgon, demodogs, and the mindflayer. Her hand stretched out toward another, toward Will, reaching up for rescue. She looked strong and fearless, determined. It was well done and rather striking. She looked at Will, who shrugged and glanced away.

"You've saved me so many different ways," he murmured. "That's kind of how I see you."

Mike, peering at the picture in her lap, nodded slowly. "I think it's how we all see her too."

Eleven stared at it a moment longer, observing the space between their outstretched fingers and feeling the pang of desperation in that gap. She had to reassure herself that Will was safe now.

"Thank you," she murmured.

"It's probably best if you don't show my mom," Will explained in almost a whisper. "She gets kind of upset by reminders of what happened. She has saved me too, you both have, but I don't think she'd want something like this."

Eleven stood up immediately and took all her new treasures — minus the VHS which Jonathan asked for to test his efforts, to her room. She propped Will's picture against her lamp, next to her music box. It sparked conflicted feelings in her when she looked at it, feelings of fear and guilt, but also of reassurance that she'd made the right choice a few times. She'd have to contemplate it more later, when she had time to herself. Right now she just wanted to be with her favorite people.

Again, she closed the door behind her and resumed her place on the couch by Mike.

"So," he said, grinning. "That's Christmas."

"I'm sorry. I don't have gifts to give you," Eleven confessed.

"Don't worry about that. This year wasn't about us."

He looked so happy, so pleased. She couldn't help the little grin that crept over her own face in response.

"Mike," she said, remembering. "I saw your house."

"What?" He sat up straighter. "When?"

"Last night. We went to see the lights."

"He took you for a drive?" Mike's voice was off, but she wasn't sure why.

"Yes."

"You took her for a drive?" He asked again, this time over to Hopper. A slight accusation tinged his voice, giving it a barbed edge. "In public?"

Hopper rolled his eyes. "Yeah, kid, I did. It was a rare treat, don't get excited."

Eleven lightly touched his arm, drawing his attention back to her. Now was not the time for a battle between those two. She tried another small smile. "It was pretty."

The tension in his face remained for a moment longer, but it finally eased when he let go of whatever bothered him about this revelation. He made himself relax. "My parents pay people to hang the lights so my dad doesn't have to do it. It does look nice, though. I'm happy you got to see it."

"I saw...snow...men?" She tested the word.

Mike grinned. "Yeah, snowmen! They're fun to make. What did you think? Did you like them?"

She shrugged. It was enough reply for him, and he laughed a little.

"I never thought about how weird they must look to someone who has never seen them."

"We should make one sometime," Will interjected, grinning.

Mike's eyes widened. "We should make one now!"

"Mom," Will said, getting to his feet. "Can we go outside?"

Jonathan lifted a brow and glanced between his mother and younger brother. "You want to go out there? It's freezing."

"El's never played in the snow," Will explained.

Eleven gave Mike a skeptical eye. "Play?"

Snow didn't seem like something to play with. It was cold and wet and hostile and made survival much more difficult. Since she'd been given a safe haven from which to observe the cold white fluff, she'd decided it could also be beautiful. But fun? Something to enjoy?

Mike grinned. "Yeah, it is cold, but pretty fun. Remember when I told you about sledding? You can only go sledding in the snow. Plus you can make shapes with it like snowballs and snowmen."

She wasn't quite convinced, but she could tell he was eager to try, which made the idea more appealing. She glanced up at Hopper for his answer.

Joyce looked at him too. Everyone did. His was ultimately the permission they all needed.

Hopper passed a hand over his beard, his eyes narrowing as he studied El's face in his deliberation. Finally a half-smile tipped his face and he nodded. "Sure, okay. Let's break out that new snow gear, huh, kiddo?"

...

Mike was glad he brought his hat and gloves. He almost hadn't, but his mother insisted right before they left. Too bad she didn't insist on snow pants too. He waded through the snow ahead of the pack, leading the way and carving a path for El to follow. He felt hyper aware of her presence right behind him, and kept glancing back to gauge her reactions on this little adventure.

Rolling a snowman had the curious effect of putting everyone — including the crusty Hopper and nervous Joyce — in childlike moods. What began as a dedicated task soon turned into mild chaos when Jonathan lobbed a snowball directly at Will.

Will squawked and immediately began compacting his own snowball to retaliate.

"Jonathan!" Joyce cried, horrified.

Will ignored his mother's concern and hurled his snowball back at his brother. He missed and began making another.

Nancy gave Eleven a knowing shake of the head and a wink. "What did I tell you? Boys are—"

But her sentences cut off when one of Jonathan's projectiles exploded against her shoulder.

"Hey!" She cried, whipping around, eyes wide. "You're gonna pay for that! Remember, I have better aim than you!"

Eleven winced as a flurry of snowballs began to fly. She slid behind Mike for shelter.

He turned his back on the fight to shield her and himself. Her eyes met his and he saw nervous uncertainty there.

"Don't worry, it's all just a big game. Here, do it like this." He scooped up a pile of snow in his hands and began to compact it, turning it and smoothing it into a ball.

She mimicked his actions hesitantly. As it began to solidify under her hands, he saw a spark of surprise and wonder creep into her face.

He grinned. "Yeah, like that."

A snowball smashed into his back, sending lightning pinpricks of cold showering against his neck. He wheeled around and hurled his ball directly at Nancy, who he recognized immediately as his attacker. She shrieked and dodged without great effort. Not surprising. Mike knew he was a terrible shot.

He turned back around. Eleven had a well-formed snowball in her hand, and an impish look on her face.

"Who are you going to hit?" He asked.

She peered around him at the brothers scrambling around in the snow, and at Nancy, throwing fistfuls of loose powder on them if they

got too close. Mike watched as her gaze moved from them to Joyce and Hopper, leaning against the too-large base of the would-be snowman, sharing a smoke.

"Them?" He asked, surprised at her daring.

She nodded, and mentally lifted the snowball from her hand.

Hopper's bark of protest signaled the sound of true battle, for after El's telekinetic attack reigned powdery chill over him and Joyce, there was no going back. He hit El with his revenge, giving her the first taste of snow. Will, Mike, and El teamed up against the two adults, while Jonathan and Nancy split — she with the kids, and he with Joyce and Hopper. It was a lopsided fight, but a fun one. Nancy helped them shore up a battlement around the base of the snowman to hide behind as they formed an ammo supply. Jonathan, Joyce, and Hopper were quicker at that, and a hail of projectiles rained down them steadily.

Mike and Will skidded through the snow as they ran suicide missions beyond their shelter, lobbing snow bombs with remarkably poor aim. Nancy meanwhile sniped them off far more expertly over their newly formed wall. Eleven supplied her with hasty ammunition. Once, when Mike returned from a failed mission covered in snow and laughing, she grabbed his arm and pulled him down to her level. Cold and wet seeped through his pants as he knelt beside her and the pile of snowballs she'd made.

Her eyes flashed wickedly. "My turn."

He grinned and motioned for Will to return.

Nancy glanced back. "What's going on?"

"Keep distracting them, we have a plan," he told her quickly.

Will made a mad dash for cover, but a snowball knocked him face-first into the snow inches from base. He lifted his head, snow clinging to his cheeks and forehead, laughing.

"Will, are you okay?" Joyce asked from across the field of battle.

He waved an arm at her dismissively.

"Come on," Mike urged. "El has a plan."

Will crawled the rest of the way and wiped his face. "Good. They're way better than us."

"Speak for yourself," Nancy said over her shoulder.

Mike gave El a nod, and she grinned. Her chin dipped and her eyes darkened in that look of concentration. Three snowballs lifted into the air and rocketed straight to their intended victims. Within a second, three more followed them. And three more. Barrage after precisely aimed telekinetic barrage found their marks until her ammo ran out and the cries of their ambushed opponents died down.

"Okay, okay, we surrender!" Hopper's voice called from deep within the trees.

They all peeked over the edge of their battlement and saw their enemies staggering out from behind various trees, absolutely covered in snow.

Mike laughed. Everyone was in good moods, and this had been nothing but fun — yet he still felt a smug sense of satisfaction at seeing Hopper so thoroughly bested by someone he liked to pretend was under his control.

Eleven glanced at Mike with a look he recognized — had seen before, when she made Troy wet himself. He thrilled at the memory, at the surge of attraction he felt in that moment, and grinned.

"Are you okay, Mom?" Will asked when the others arrived.

Joyce shook snow out of the hood on her coat. She smiled, no sign of annoyance anywhere about her. "We deserved it."

"Yeah, we should have had the girl who took out a monster and an interdimensional gate on our team," Jonathan laughed.

Will nodded. "That was *awesome*!"

"Well, I'm officially cold. We gonna finish this thing, or what?" Hopper asked, kicking at the large round base of the snowman.

They tore down the makeshift barrier and used it to roll a second ball. Everyone took the task with elevated moods and even the shivering that soon set in didn't dampen their fun.

Through it all, though, Mike found himself frequently distracted by Eleven's soft sounds of happiness — a little laugh here, a gasp there, and the occasional utterance of his own name when she wanted him. She paid a good deal of attention to Will too, but Mike didn't think anything of it. The two clearly had a unique kind of connection, but it didn't feel threatening to his own feelings for her.

They finished stacking the snowman. Jonathan and Will went off to hunt for good twigs as arms, and Nancy went to find the other trimmings they'd need. Hopper and Joyce went inside to warm up and start some cocoa. It left Mike and El suddenly and quite unexpectedly alone.

He couldn't deny being glad of this fact. She had become irresistibly alluring throughout this winter escapade — her cheeks and nose pink from the sting of cold made her eyes seem brighter somehow, and tiny snow crystals clung to the curls which stuck out around the edges of her hat. More than the physical attraction, though, her obvious happiness overwhelmed him. He'd never seen her happy like this in all the time he was with her last year. But between the Snow Ball and tonight, he'd witnessed her radiance. She was beautiful.

Mike had harbored crushes before, but not like this. No girl had ever taken possession of so much of him. Just looking at her like this made it difficult to breathe. She'd been through so much, had endured so much, but somehow could still stand here beside him, marveling at the sight of snow falling around them in a cascading star field.

She glanced at him and caught him in his stare. He tried to look away, embarrassed, but her magnetic gaze drew him again and he found himself falling into those inky, infinite pools.

His heart pounded a nervous rhythm in his chest as he tentatively took her hands in his. The fabric of their gloves separated their touch,

but he felt the thrill of it anyway.

She didn't pull away, didn't resist. She even drew nearer. This, the girl who had flinched away at his attempted touch when he first saw her tattoo. He'd been this close and closer to her before, but each time he marveled anew at her trust in him, allowing his touch.

His heart beat a little faster now, a sort of panic rising in the midst of his wonder, knowing that the others could return at any moment and break this spell. He didn't want that. He wanted her all to himself, for as long as he could.

"El," he started, though he didn't really know what to say.

The look in her eye was too much, and he too overcome for anything other than one action. He closed the last few inches between them with a quick, hasty kiss. When he pulled away, she looked at him with that pleased surprise and so much more, and without quite planning to, he moved in again. This time, he lingered just a little longer.

When they parted again, he searched her face to make sure she was alright. She looked at the ground, her cheeks far rosier than before and a sweet little smile playing at the corner of her mouth. When she finally met his eye again, he saw that she was more than okay with it.

The snow fell around them in silent procession, wrapping them in the peaceful quiet of mute winter.

He let her hands drop and stepped back, seeing that her gaze moved beyond him to the woods. He turned.

Jonathan and Will were making their way back, laughing and joking with one another.

Eleven let out a shaky breath and glanced again at Mike, shrugging a little.

He nodded. The moment was over. But at least he'd been able to share something of his feelings for her before the interruption.

"We found some good ones!" Will called, waving one of the sticks in

the air.

"Good," Mike called back. "Come on, it's freezing."

...

That night, Eleven crawled into her bed with a heart almost too full to bear. She'd struck out on her own earlier in the year in desperate search of what *home* meant. Hopper's lies made her feel as trapped as in the lab, despite his attempts to call it home. Mike and his promise of home had been lost to her. Becky wanted to give her a home, but Mama sent her to find another. Eleven was certain she wouldn't have been happy there anyway, forever living with the reminder of what her mother had become trying to rescue her. Kali tried to make her a home too, but it was a home built on revenge and hunting and running. Eleven had ultimately determined that her true home lay behind her, not ahead, and she went back to rescue the people who needed her help as much as she needed their love.

Now she'd found something more. That feeling of family hadn't faded over the course of the evening. It had only grown stronger. And now that she'd felt it, she wanted more of it. Wanted to feel it every day.

She twisted the crank on her music box, letting the chiming little melody wash over her as she remembered the feel of Mike's cold lips pressed against her own, and the fluttery feelings elicited from it. Nestling into her new fluffy blanket, she wondered how it was possible that a group of people could have become more necessary to her than anything else in the world, as indispensable as air. She used to think all humans were like the scientists at the lab. But some of them, like the first man who helped her with clothing and food, were kind and good and selfless. Like Kali, she had collected her favorite of these people and surrounded herself. Now she didn't know how she'd ever do without them again. She'd felt it for Mike from the beginning, almost from the very first, but now she felt that for Hopper too, and Joyce and her boys, and Nancy, and Dustin and Lucas — an ardent need to have them all in her life. To be with them. Especially Hopper, and especially Mike.

She hugged the music box to her chest and let the music, echoing the things she felt but had no words for, carry her off to dreams of snow

and mothers, fathers, and brothers. And somewhere amidst those dreams, she too dreamed of the kisses given to her by someone who was decidedly not a brother, and much more than a friend.